

Unheard Whispers

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Summary: There are many parts to a story, not just one or two. These are the tales that intertwine in and around I Hear Him Scream. After all, it's the little things found in the background that make up the big picture.

1. Alone

The eternal quest of the individual human being is to shatter his loneliness.

-Norman Cousins

Sometimes, when it is quiet, I sit still and wonder.

Why do I stay here? Why don't I up and leave? It really is _none_ of my business. I shouldn't have to deal with this kind of thingâ€”I don't deserve it, as a Shadow-Blenderâ€”but still I stay. I have no idea why and it _kills_ me.

The unanswered questions made me want to scream; every single day, they sneak into my brain like tiny little parasites. Of course, making any noise at all would cause unwanted attention. If a lone dragon standing in broad daylight on a cliff, wings half-open, wasn't drawing enough of it, anyways. I was stuck in a sick dance, constantly flexing my wings, readying myself to jump and leave this gods-damned place behindâ€”but then something inside me would force me to retreat, almost like a reflex.

I stared at the ocean waves, opening my wings again. I wanted to jump. I wanted to jump _so_ bad. _Even_ if my wings snapped shut midair, at least I would be free of this place. At least it would offer relief from this hell that has become this nest.

But you can't leave themâ€”!

My wings, on their own accord, slapped firmly against my back. I gritted my teeth so hard it hurt.

For about an hour, I continued to do this: open my wings, doubt myself, shut them, get angry, open them again, and on and on. It was finally broken when I heard a soft flutter and a _click _as a dragon landed behind me. I didn't turn around to greet them, as was customary. They waited for several seconds before saying dully, "It is not wise to stand in the open like this. Even if we are at our nest."

I snorted and stretched my shoulder muscles again. The sound my wings made as they opened was something similar to leaves rustling. "Go away."

It either ignored or didn't notice my glum mood. "Her Majesty wants to you to come back in and stop standing here."

As it spoke, I leaned into a takeoff position, hope burning fiercely in my chest that I was actually about to jump into the air and finally leave. A sudden wave of nausea hit me after the dragon finished and I stumbled, backing up a little so I didn't fall off for real.

Cringing, I finally turned around to look at it. It was completely motionless, almost as if it were trying to become one with the cold stones around us. Its eyes were glazed over and blank, staring at me but not really seeing me. I turned around halfway, stopped, and looked again at the ocean. My whole body ached to fly out over it, never looking back.

I wilted. "Doâ€|you ever feel like you want to see what's out there?"

"No."

My heart thudded heavily in my chest, and I squeezed my eyes shut, brows lowered. "Not once? You're content living here forever?"

"Yes." I turned my head towards the dragon. It suddenly unfroze, its mindless limbs sluggishly regaining motion. Apparently deciding that I was following it, it began to turn towards the gaping, pitch-black hole that I had exited the nest from. "Her Majesty wants you to come back in," it said again.

The powerful words edged me away from the cliff. I hung my head, my back to the ocean, but still refusing to walk back into that horrible cave. "You just want to serve her forever?" I pleaded desperately.

The dragon looked over its shoulder at me. "Yes," it said, and was swallowed whole by the darkness.

"Right," I whispered, hunching over. "I thought so."

* * *

><p>Hey, guys!

**After debate with myself, I decided to put this up for two reasons: to add more depth to _I Hear Him Scream_, and to fill in the huge

gaps between updates. These shorts will center on the events during and before the story. They will have spoilers in them, so I'll put a warning on top of the oneshots that do.**

This takes place about seven-ish years after Toothless starts to live in the nest with the Green Death. About fifty years will pass before the events of IHHS happen. There's a lot of symbolism, though it's pretty obvious. The dragon isn't described at all for a reason, too.

Hope you guys liked this little tidbit, and the ones that are going to come after it!

2. Please

Please, Odin. Please.

The sun was like a lightning bolt, brilliant and destructive and foreboding all at once as it slunk below the ocean, deciding to retreat this battle to live another day. I stood in the entrance of the Kill Ring, knowing full well what I was going to do. Knowing how my people would react, knowing that I was all but sailing into thick ice.

A sharp pain burst at the surface of my chest, bruised skin frayed against the chainmail that covered my entire torso in a tight weave. I brought a hand up to it, almost as if gripping my heart, remembering the devil's slitted pupils, its look of satisfaction as it foretold my death in its fangs, and the heartwrenched scream of the other, and the evaporation of malice in the dragon pinning me to the stone.

He'd made it stop. That tiny thing that a child could slayâ€|had tamed the Night Fury. The offspring of lightning and death itself.

Not for the first time, I wondered what was wrong with myself, how I could become so ignorant and blind that I'd consider forgiving a _dragon _that had caused so much damage to our village to the point of tricking the dragon-killing prodigy.

I looked down at my sword and grimaced at its sight. What if I hadn't been so foolhardy when it first happened? It is the Viking way to attack and kill at the first opportunity, and it is because of this dogma that my village has thrived for so long. And yet I was doubting it as a result of a dragon's single action.

With a bitter chuckle, I stepped into the Ring. I knew this would end in failure, that I would leave heartbroken at confirming my earliest suspicions. One does not simply _live _and _act _like a dragon and still be themselves. But the lingering doubts held their ground, demanding I give him a chance, that he is as misunderstood as he so often hinted at and that I knew so well as he grew up. He had been the scapegoat of the children and, frankly, a disappointment. But not in the way of a proud father whose son lost a race, but disappointment in that I had realized long ago that my son would never fend for himself, always relying on outward help, and that one day I would join the halls of Valhalla and he would be left utterly alone and defenseless. No father should do that to their own son.

I had tried to mend our relationship, help him learn to be a Viking so that he would live a _safe _lifeâ€“gods, I had dragged him kicking and screaming, terrorized him with hunting and killing and weapons that he had feared in his youth, all of which if only to desensitize him so that he would not shy away when he had no other options. Yet he never changed, always the outsider, and I began to resent my failure and push it onto him, blaming him for something that was clearly out of his control; sure, the boy could do with some meat, but that only does so much.

And only now, when he may be gone, do I realize this. More than once he had complained of my "disappointed scowl", and I had just pushed it off as him being oversensitive yet again.

With each step towards the cage I felt a stone fill my heart, anxiety and dread and the tiniest speck of hope taking flight and swinging round and round through my head.

Maybeâ€“if I made an offering to him, he would open up. It was clear that he and I had never been closeâ€“Thor, how I _loathe _that it was the oppositeâ€“so perhaps if I went at it at a rational standpoint he would listen. I could make him an offering, I finalized with a little nod. If he were still there he would listen to reason if it was presented to him, and from there we could finally build the pieces of our crumbled bond back together. He had to still be there. He _had _to!

I stopped just at the door. He'd written "Dad" in the floor. He'd stolen nothing but a basket and a fishing net. Not such a huge lossâ€“understandable in his position. And yet I had flown into a rage, sealing our fates because I was unable to see past my agony at seeing him again for the first time, seeing how small and afraid he looked, seeing sentience in those pine eyes. It had struck me with a blow that still ached to this very moment.

For so long I had duped myself into believe he was a mere husk, and time and time again he showed signs of the exact opposite. I didn'tâ€“_couldn'tâ€“_understand. So I had reacted in the Viking way. Attack. Destroy. Kill.

Sweaty fingers that refused to stop shaking wrapped around the lever that would unseal the doors. I closed my eyes, praying that I could finally make this right, that I could end this suffering. This battle would not end up as it had with his mother. I was bringing this family back together, and nothing would stop me.

Oh, gods, please just give me my son back.

* * *

><p>Stoick's thoughts directly before he goes to speak with Hiccup in Chapter 9. He's not the monster many people seem to think he isâ€“|sound familiar?

Stoick is reservedâ€“even to himselfâ€“but all he really does love his family, and misses them terribly.

****Hey, everyone!****

****Here is the second half of the IHHS update! Or is it the first half, since you're probably here because I requested you to read this before Hiccup's chapter? Anyways.****

****Since I haven't said it before: thanks to everyone who has reviewed, followed, and favorite ****_**Unheard Whispers**_****! You guys are awesome.****

****Onwards with the chapter!****

*** * ***

><p>The door opened with nothing but a soft squeak, but it pierced the air with the force of an arrow nonetheless. Snapped out of my lethargic daze, I scrambled away from organizing the kitchen drawers to the front, sliding into place behind the center of the counter that had been raised in the shop. At mid-day, this was our first customer; there was no such thing as failure. I could already feel Bergthora's threatening gaze railing into my head, forewarning all the horrible things she would do if I let this one slip away.<p>

The customer in question was a local sheep-herder who only went into town every so often. He got right to it, pulling out a huge sack of coins and explaining to me that it was the anniversary of his wife's untimely death in battle with a Monstrous Nightmare, and so he was going to spend the night celebrating and indulging in foods that he normally avoided due to price.

"Celebrating?!" I gasped, snapping my head back. "Butâ€|why?"

The old man ran a hand over his smooth scalp with a toothy grin. "Well, young lady, my wife was somethin' of an excitement addict. She hated bein' all down in the dumps. I doubt she would'a wanted me to mourn over her," he said with a wink.

I couldn't help but smile. "That'sâ€|really nice, actually."

The farmer blushed and shook his head, waving a hand through the air. "Naaaw. Now, about your biscuitsâ€|"

He ordered an entire string of them and gave me a pure silver coin without hesitation, despite my protests that he was spending more money than necessary. After a pointless argument I gave up, went to the back, and grabbed two strings of biscuits. Within a few minutes I had untied all the knots and squeezed the breads onto one string, resulting in something of an overdone Snoggletog decoration.

The farmer wasn't fooled when I brought it out and placed his order on the counter. He stood with crossed arms, a stern frown planted on his face and one eyebrow nearly shooting off his forehead. I stared back as innocently as possible until, with a chuckle and a shake of his head, he accepted his goods.

"I 'spose the neighbors will have some, too, then," he said. "You have a good day now, Astrid!"

"Oh! Uh, you too!" I returned. The farmer exited the shop, leaving

behind nothing but a few tollings of the bells left behind.

Of course, everyone in the village knew who I was. But it was still a reminder, a painful one at that, and my grin sunk from my lips with ease. In the weeks that had passed since the two Night Furies had escaped, the people of Berk had come to terms with the fact that the local "dragon-conspirers" had been punished appropriately. It was made plenty clear that we had lost our dragon-killing apprenticeships. Our training had been decreased to simple self-defense in the face of any enemy, dragon or Viking, and was administered by our parents.

As luck would have it, my parents decided that I knew well more than enough about defense, and had told me to focus on my current apprenticeship over everything else.

I still hated itâ€_duh_. But there was nothing I could do about it now. Once Chief Stoick had set his mind on something, it was impossible to get him to waver. I just had to accept the fact that I wasn't good enough, had made the wrong decisions, and was slowly making it right again. Maybe a chance would come up in the future someday.

That still didn't mean I had to _like _it, though.

The day passed without much excitement. I spent a large portion of it sweeping and scrubbing the floor. Bergthora and I had quickly come to the agreement that I would handle most monetary affairs, cleaning, and general not-baking necessities of the shop and leave the cooking to her after I had somehow managed to make a loaf of bread explode like an angry Nightmare. _After _it had left the oven's confines. Even Fishlegs was still baffled on how that was even _possible_.

As the sun sunk further out of the sky and drafted the land in shadows, we closed up the shop and took a moment to stand outside the door.

"Be safe goin' home, Astrid," Bergthora said, slapping a firm hand onto my shoulder. She squeezed for a second with a miniscule grin, then turned and made her way through the cold towards the center of the village.

I waited for awhile, slouching and staring out at the sunset. I could just barely see Loki's Mountainâ€named so for the amount of trouble the teens of Berk often got into on it as generations passedâ€with the Kill Ring sunken deep inside the mountain opposite of it like a steel wasp's nest. The weak sunlight glinted off it made it easy to spot among the gray stones around it.

For a moment I was unable to take my eyes off of the Ring. Then, with a tiny shake of my head, I huffed and turned away.

The walk home, as always, was uneventful. I was alone save for the few drifting flakes of snow floating down from the heavens.

* * *

><p>Fwip!

The throwing dagger sunk itself deep into the crudely-drawn target on

the pine tree, a full hand's width above the center. Some of the snow that had settled on the needles shifted and plopped to the ground.

"Wow, Fishlegs!" I said, uncrossing my arms and pushing myself off the tree I'd been leaning on, giving him a light round of applause. "That was pretty impressive." _You know, all things considering._

The chubby teen laughed and pressed his fingers together. "Nah, it was nothing," he waved me off. His eyes flickered to a distracted Ruffnut besides me, then fell in disappointment. "Wellâ€uh."

I elbowed the farm girl with as little subtlety as possible, making her start and snap to attention. "Woah! Uh, wow, Fishlegs!" She rushed, giving a horribly strained grin. "That was great and really spot-on andâ€aw, who am I kidding? Sorry, wasn't watching." She shrugged in the same manner that you do when something unavoidable happens. "Still, looks like you're better-ish. You actually hit the tree this time, so there's that." She beamed, giving him a thumbs-up.

Fishlegs blushed. "Yeah, that gives me an inspiring boost of confidence," he tried to spare his dignity as he leaned down to pick up another weapon. "I still don't see why I have to be an expert in _everything_, though," he said as he studied his dagger, "especially since I'm perfectly fine with a hammer and my strategizing. Really, this is probably the most pointless thing I could be doing right now. And I've done a lot of pointless things. Like fishing. And hunting." He faced the target and steeled himself. Then he flung the dagger at it.

The handle smacked into the wood and bounced merrily down the hill we were on. Fishlegs slumped over as if he'd lost his entire book collection in one fell swoop.

"Awww," Ruffnut half-chuckled while I held back a snort, turning my face away to spare Fishlegs the embarrassment of seeing me laugh at him.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he grumbled, trampling off into the woods to retrieve his weapon. "What can you do, I guess?"

The remaining two of us didn't reply, having no answer; his question was its own solution. In the sudden lack of the only source of sound in the area, Ruffnut and I leaned against our selective trees and said nothing, making the air feel clogged of noise. I let myself laugh a little bit, earning a confused look from my friend. She raised an eyebrow, prompting further explanation.

"It's just, I don't know." I flipped my head to dislodge some hair from in front of my eyes. "It's nice just hanging out, you know? It's been forever." Even as I spoke I looked over my shoulder, half-expecting to see Bergthora attempting to drag me back to work on one of my few days off.

My best friend gave a deep, uncharacteristic sigh. "Yeah," she mumbled, staring at her feet. "I barely see Tuffnut anymore. We're usually working during the day and at night we're too tired to even smack heads. It's a miracle Grannie gave me a day off at all." She

slouched further into her tree, practically moaning the last sentence with as much complaint as she could pack into her voice.

"Same here," I returned in a slightly more mature tone, though I couldn't mask all of my resentment. "At leastâ€"

A surprised yelp from below cut me off, followed by distant shout. Ruffnut and I exchanged a glance.

"â€Well, I guess we should help him," my undisturbed friend decided, moving along at a leisurely stroll as we followed Fishlegs' shallow footprints in the snow. He was sitting quite a ways down, pouting and still searching for his dagger. "So, let's seeâ€today, we're all off," she ducked under a tree branch and failed to hold it for me, forcing me to dive out of the way as it swung back with murderous intent, "so naturally all we do is watch Fishlegs throw knives at trees and then help him after he falls down a hill." She grabbed another branch, glanced over her shoulder, and with a devilish grin let it slide free of her grip.

I dodged it with ease, kicking some snow back at her. "Sounds like a good day."

Ruffnut laughed. "Yeah, it kinda is."

* * *

><p>About a week after the miraculous three-person day off, I was awoken to the horrifying sound of screaming children.<p>

And by "screaming children" and "horrifying", I mean that a whole horde of them were playing in the street in front of my house. Berk had been struck by a blizzard that had gone unnoticed by many the previous night, and the kids were ecstatic to be able to tromp around in snow that towered over them. I looked out the window in our main room, wondering how long it took them to tunnel their way that far into the street in the first place.

There was also the problem of how I was going to be able to walk past them without being assaulted by millions of pointless questions. Children had a habit to ask my friends and I every question they could think of about the Night Furies and just dragons in general, somehow assuming that we were experts in the field. I would have been flattered by it if I didn't know that the only reason we were so interesting to them was because of our infamy and nothing else.

I pulled away from the window to avoid being seen. Maybe I could take the backdoor in the kitchen, and if I hustled I could track through the thick snow and make it to work on time.

My plan would have worked perfectly if my father hadn't noticed me making my escape.

"Mornin', Astrid," he greeted me, walking over and shutting the door I'd just opened. I gave him a flat look that was completely ignored. "Careful not to let the cold in."

"Dad, I have to go to work," I complained, reaching for the door handle and begging to the gods that he would just roll with it. It began to open with the slightest of creaks.

He didn't. "Why're you takin' the back door?" He walked over to the front window, glanced outside and burst into laughter. "Tryin' to ward off the little Terrors, are ya?" He wheezed as he slogged back into the kitchen. "I woulda thought you would be able to handle all of them!" He shut the backdoor (again) and pushed me into the main room. "Right. Off you go."

"But Dad!"

Dad's easygoing grin fell and he crossed his arms, giving me a stern look. "I'm not jokin', Astrid. There are consequences to your choices, after all." He nodded towards the door. "Pesky kiddos are one of them." He gave me one last nudge towards the entryway and grinned when I reluctantly pulled it open.

I stomped off into the snow, mostly unnoticed by the kids still playing "Kill the Dragon". For a moment I found myself completely ignored. Not one to squander good luck, I picked up the pace as fast as I could before

"Have a good day at work, Astrid!" Dad all but roared into the brisk morning air. I spun around and shot him the dirtiest, most hateful glare I could while the children silenced. He waved, gave me a gleeful grin, and shut the door.

Maybe if I just pretended not to notice the kids

"Astrid! Astrid! How do you kill a Night Fury?!" One of the little buggers shouted, and the spell was broken. The whole lot of them chased after me like little yapping dogs, following me the entire walk to the bakery. To anyone glancing outside, it must have looked like half of the village's mothers had dumped their offspring onto me and told me to watch them for the day.

Oh, Odin, have mercy.

I answered their ridiculous, absurd, and oftentimes completely random questions as appropriately as I could, forcing myself to keep in mind that they weren't trying to be annoying on purpose, right? Kids were just like this as their nature, right? _

By the time I had reached my destination, I was nearly at my wit's end with the little tykes and seriously considering abstaining from having children of my own for the remainder of my life. With a forced smile, I turned to them and said, "Ah, that's too bad, kids. I'm at work now. I'll see you later!"

Without waiting for an answer, I ducked into the bakery as fast as I could. A child wailed, "But you didn't tell us how to lure trolls into traps!", and the door slammed shut.

Bergthora, who had been counting coins at the counter, raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Looks like a good start to the day, right?"

I groaned.

* * *

><p>All things considered, it took astonishingly long for us to

notice that something was wrong.<p>

With the bloodshed of that eventful day in the Kill Ring and two powerful martyrs presumably living amongst the other dragons, it was expected, almost, for there to be a lag in dragon raids. After all, our message had been clear: the terrible actions of the Night Fury, from transformation physical and mental, would not go unpunished. We would avenge Hiccup with the deaths of dozens, and the dragons had somehow learned of our decree.

But they were _dragons_. _Vengeful_, hateful creatures that mindlessly followed their first instinct in any given situation. If anything, the beasts should have sunk their fangs into Berk tenfold after they recovered. But the effect was the exact opposite of any known behavior displayed by the winged serpents.

They had fled Berk. Which had left the unsettling question lingering in the air: _why?_

The paranoia seized its icy claws around the village once the snow had fallen and the ice about to set in, leaving us at our most vulnerable. In an effort to ward off mass panic, Chief Stoick called a meeting into place.

The entire village flocked to it like wayward moths, forcing my parents and I to be unlucky enough to be pushed to the back. It was impossible to see anything. Even the dragon statue perched on the ceiling was hidden from view under the much taller and bulkier adults. Town Hall was packed far beyond its intended limit, filled with voices both deep and high-pitched. I even heard a few infants and toddlers crying.

A little bit down the hall, I noticed a familiar double-horned helmet and stocky build; it couldn't have been anyone but Snotlout. After a few seconds of intense staring, I managed to catch his eye. He gave me a very nervous grin and a frantic wave, motioning me over to him. It took little time for me to decide to go over; standing next to anyone _besides_ my loud and oftentimes embarrassing parents was usually the first thing I tried to do in social gatherings.

I nodded in acknowledgement and began to push my way through the crowd. Or tried to, actually. Those around me were unwilling to get out of the way and, as a result, I was met with an unmovable wall of flesh.

The fires burst to life, signaling the beginning of Town Hall's most important meeting yet. I shrugged my shoulders and held my palms up towards the ceiling towards Snotlout, who returned the gesture with more than a little bit of exasperation. I understood his sentiment; due to our apprenticeships, we hadn't really hung out since before the Kill Ring event, and we hadn't exactly parted on good terms. I knew Snotlout was guilty, but also angry that we hadn't listened to him earlier as we should have.

Silence prevailed all but for a few whispered conversations that were shushed out of the buildings. Then, "I'm sure you all know what we're here for."

Even though he was out of my line of sight and literally on the opposite end of Town Hall, Chief Stoick's words felt as commanding as

ever. "As you all know, Berk has seen the most peace it's had since its founding, even though the ice has set. Any seasoned warrior knows that this season is the most dangerous from dragon raids, and yet we haven't even seen a scale from them."

"We need to raise our defenses!" A man cried out from somewhere across the room the second the Chief paused for breath. "They're fixin' to hit us all at once!"

Gobber's voice cut the man off, dripping with annoyance and powerful against the small uproar the other Viking had caused. "Don't be stupid! The beasts ain't _completely _scatterbrained_. _They know what we'd do to 'em." This was emphasized by a very loud ringing of metal on metal, likely from him smacking his hook on something. Several others, my father included, agreed with loud "yeah!"s.

Chief Stoick waiting for everyone to calm down and continued, "Gobber's right. I've asked you all to come here not to plan for war, but to put yer minds at ease. Panicking is the _worst _thing we can do." It was almost audible how many people turned to look in the direction of the man who had spoken. "Right now we must carry on with our lives, but cautiously. Reinforcements to our homes should be put down, and weapons sharpened."

His calm tone turned to acid swifter than a heartbeat, an entire hurricane bottled up inside a mere mortal's words. "And if they return, we'll make them wish they never had."

The hatred, the sheer _venom _in his voice more potent than that of a Terror, was enough to send a shiver down my spine. Everyone had known that the Chief had developed a more extreme loathing of dragons than thought possible after Hiccup's transformation. But I had never seen it materialize so strongly before. Not on the Chief, who was always calm in front of his people.

Town Hall silenced. Nobody dared speak up against the Chief's declaration, the ironic promise of safety and death in a few tiny words strung together. The crowd shifted, people glanced around, and Snotlout managed to shoot me a wide-eyed look across the room at me.

The meeting, obviously, was over. A few footsteps signaled Chief Stoick stepping down from the platform he'd been standing on, and the wary mass of Vikings began shuffling out. I stuck to the wall and waited, watching everyone pass by with their expressions mixtures of shock, comfort, and confusion. I'm sure I looked about the same. The subject at hand, the Chief's words, and just the fact that a Town Hall meeting had ended faster than it took to gather everyone there in the first place was difficult to comprehend.

Snotlout managed to push his way through the crowd to me, the nervous smile returning. "Uh, hey, Astrid," he said. "You look good today."

"Hey," I returned, placing one hand on my hip and slouching ever so slightly. I kept my eyes busy, never settling on one thing for too long. Town Hall had lost about half of its population, allowing me to actually see across the room. It also meant that we should be following the crowd as well. "You wanna get out of here?" I asked, already pushing myself off the wall.

"Uh, sure!" We merged into the living current of people, quieting for a moment. It became unbearable too fast for Snotlout, apparently; he started chattering away like a midmorning songbird, eyes flicking back and forth. "So, uh, I was thinkingâ€¦well, I meanâ€¦" Snotlout steeled himself, grimacing, and amended, "How are thingsâ€¦going?"

I raised an eyebrow at the shift in the conversation. "Well, it's goodâ€¦all things considering. I guess." My hand drifted to the empty space that my trusty axe used to occupy. "You know how I feel about my job, though."

He gave an uneasy chuckle. "Y-yeah, I do. Sorrâ€¦" he cut his apology off short, a thick frown crossing his face. We stepped out of the doorway with Snotlout looking somewhere far away and me staring at my feet, both of us grimacing under guilt and anger. The Chief's nephew threw himself out of it, luckily, and shook his head. "If it makes you feel better, I get treated more like a slave than anything at my job. I don't think Thorn even knows my name. He just calls me 'boy'." He rolled his eyes at this.

I smiled a bit. "Well, that's endearing. Does he mentor Tuffnut and Fishlegs, too?" Another thought came to me, and I asked, "Where are they, anyways?"

Snotlout laughed, turning to face me for the first time. "Oh, man, you don't know? Fishlegs told me Ruffnut told him that she and Tuffnut got grounded for stealing their neighbor's sheep and hiding it in their parent's room."

The world came to a halt as I dug my feet in the ground. I'd clearly misheard that. "They hidâ€¦a sheepâ€¦in their parents' room?" I repeated slowly.

"Yup," Snotlout chortled as he returned his eyes to our environment, "don't ask me why. You never know. But that's why they weren't here. Fishlegs, I have no idea where that dork is." We continued through the snow as he went on, "Though I did hear him getting yelled at a whole lot about his aiming skills. The guy can bludgeon anything to death, but when it comes to long-distance weapons he just _sucks._ And he can't really hunt that well. I'll bet he's at home getting' better from all the training his teacher's puttin' him through."

"And you?" I pressed. "Why were you able to be here?"

Snotlout observed his fingernails and chirped, "Thorn let me have the day off. Even though he's always yellin' at me, I get stuff done and progress _way_ _more_ than the others. Not surprising, I guessâ€¦" his easygoing grin fell just a bit, and his hand dropped to his side.

Though it was arrogant, I could see where he was coming from. "Well, your only competitions _are_ _a_ bookworm and a guy who just tried to hide a live animal in his parents' room." I shook my head, holding back a groan. Gods, Ruffnut, what were you _thinking_?

"Yeah," Snotlout said, staring at his feet this time. He let the conversation drop rather abruptly, and we meandered through the village with no real intention. Bergthora would want me back to the

shop soon, I realized. But something was clearly bothering Snotlout, with the way he was avoiding eye contact and stumbling all over himself in uneasiness.

Deciding that it would be better to wait for him to fess up what was wrong, I kept my mouth shut. Snotlout was prideful, but if something was bothering him this much then he would say something. Hopefully he would, anyways. As often as he was a jerk, Snotlout was my friend.

My patience paid off after a couple minutes. "So, Astrid," Snotlout began, keeping his tone light and casual. "You want to maybe hang out later? We could, like, workout or something." His voice shook slightly at the end of his sentence and he turned his head away, feigning interest in something nearby.

It took me a second to absorb what he'd said; I'd been fully expecting him telling me how angry he was (and rightfully should be) with me.

In the significantly more awkward silence afterwards, I considered blowing it off in annoyance or just ignoring it as usual. That had always been my approach to this kind of thing: act like it wasn't happening or be passive aggressive enough to give him a message that he either didn't receive or ignored. I glanced over at him, catching his hopeful, anxious expression that he was doing his darndest to mask behind brutish confidence.

No—that approach was downright immature. How I ever thought that it was a good idea to never address this was far out of my comprehension.

"Snotlout," I said, wringing my fingers together and then taking in a deep breath, watching it condense in the chilled air around us. This part of the village was silent, the only signs of civilization being the footprints of Vikings and their livestock along with the gentle smoke flowing from the chimneys. We were completely alone, the air empty and the snow soft beneath our feet. "Snotlout, I think we should talk."

His eyebrows lowered in resignation. "Alright. What's up?" Props to him for still trying to sound cheery, though.

I paused to collect my thoughts, pressing my lips together. Just cut to the chase, Astrid. Don't sit there and dawdle like an idiot. "This thing between you and me just isn't going to work."

Snotlout looked away again, feigning interest in something at the end of the road. "What? Why?" He asked, rubbing the back of his neck and keeping his tone light.

"We just don't go together that well," I tried to explain. "We're so different and, I don't know, I've always been more focused on becoming a warrior than anything. Even now." The last part came out as a sigh. Just as I opened my mouth to go on, I stopped, deciding that leaving it there was the most painless way to go about it. I didn't want to tell him that I'd thought of him as an arrogant, immature brute in the past, or that he'd always been so obnoxious. Those were major reasons against even giving him the light of day. Then again, that was a lifetime ago. There was no point in bringing

it up.

Staring right into my eyes, he asked in a smaller voice, "Are you sure?"

I gave him a firm, resolute nod.

"Like, really sure? Are you sure it's not because of all of this craziness?" His eyes lit up in an epiphany, and he rushed, "Is it because of how I yelled at you guys and stuff? Because if it is"

I interrupted him with a lifted hand. "Snotlout, if anyone should be apologizing for that, it should be me." He sunk like a tree drooping under the weight of snow, but I continued anyways. "I was the one who tried to keep everything a secret and then fix it without the adults' help. It was like proving that we were able to do what they could even though there was an age difference, I guess. So I'm sorry, about how that happened." We walked onto a street that looped back to the village.

"S'okay," Snotlout said. "I mean, if I had listened to you, we probably could have avoided this whole mess. I guess that I mean I guess I'm sorry too," he said, almost in defeat. Even though it clearly hurt his pride, he was sincere and that was good enough for me. Shoulders slumping, the Chief's nephew mumbled, "So you are sure. I guess I guess I should have known that. Heh."

"I could have been more clear about it," I said, trying to break the uncomfortable atmosphere. "Instead I treated it more like it was annoying."

Snotlout shook his head. "No, I, uh. I noticed that. But I thought if I tried hard enough, then maybe you and I would you know," He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "You shouldn't beat yourself up all the time, though." He gave me a little grin as he spoke.

I shook my head. "I'd rather do that than be a narcissist. A warrior has to see her own faults to improve. And, honestly, I deserve it. I kissed you, I played you on, just to get what I wanted." Snotlout didn't reply, allowing the thick coat of noiselessness to swallow up our conversation.

After it became unbearable, he mumbled, "It's not that big of a deal. That was forever ago."

"That doesn't make it any less shallow and horrible."

"Eh," he dismissed. With quite an unwarranted smirk, he said, "Though you are pre-tty good at it." I rolled my eyes and scoffed.

At that point, we had taken a turn back towards the main center of Berk. The road that led to Bergthora's shop was in sight, and as we went down it the conversation died out again. It was odd, how well everything was going. I had expected Snotlout to fight back and say something along the lines of "But I'm the best warrior our age!" or something ridiculous like that.

It dawned on me that I was probably not the only one who had learned a few new lessons, leaving me to feel more than a little

chagrined.

We stopped just outside Bergthora's shop, which had the "Open" sign hanging in the window. I reached for the handle and turned to Snotlout. "Are we good?"

Snotlout did his best to give me a genuine smile, no matter how forced it looked. "Yeah. I'll see you around," he said. With a final wave he began walking down the road towards the docks, his usual swinging gait absent.

I watched him go, wondering if there was any better way I could have handled it. But the biting cold and the job I was currently ignoring soon pushed my thoughts away from it, and I retreated into the bakery shop.

* * *

><p>I tapped my fingers against the desk, leaning my cheek against my left palm and staring at the door with half-closed eyes. It remained still, the windows showing nothing but a vacant, snowy landscape. The shop had been dead for hours, leaving me with absolutely nothing to do. I'd cleaned everything in sight, rearranged the stock on display to look as appetizing as possible, managed the money, and even gone outside to try some more vocal salesmaking.<p>

It was downright weird, how slow it was. Even on colder days we usually had a nice stream of customers. Not for the first time, I ran the idea over in my head that something had happened and nobody had bothered to let us know.

The door burst open with a loud bang and jangle, sending Bergthora rushing in from the kitchen. I straightened up in anticipation for a customerâ€|only to slump back down again when no other but Bergthora's daughter came squealing in.

"Mommy! Mommy!" The little brunette ran behind the counter without abandon, braids bouncing to and fro. She ran straight to her mother and latched onto her leg, whining, "Mommy, Johann is here and I don't have any money!"

Johann?

Leaning against the counter, I said, "Well, that explains why nobody's been coming through here."

Pursing her lips, Bergthora groused, "It would have been nice for someone to stop by an' just say somethin'." She shrugged, producing her keys from underneath her apron. "Well, time's wastin'. Let's get down there before he sails off!" She decided, much to her daughter's joy.

"Wait, really?" I blinked several times, positive that I was dreaming. I'd considered Bergthora giving me a single day off a miracle, but now she was _closing shop? _In the middle of the day?

My mentor gave me a firm pat on the shoulder. "Well, Johann only comes around once or twice a year, dear. An' clearly nobody's buyin' anythin' here." She pushed me towards the ajar door and said, "Unless

you _want _to stay here!"

Not one to squander my blessings, I turned, grabbed my coat, and _ran_, barely remembering to shout a thanks over my shoulder.

* * *

><p>The dock was impossible to see, it was so full.<p>

Johann's ship, while unremarkable in appearance, was easy to pick out among the rest of the ships at rest. For starters, it was the only one filled to the brim with consumers, and rightly so; even from the large cliff I was standing on, I could see that the boat was packed with treasures. Aside from that, Johann's ship did not fly any flags, as he made it his policy to stay neutral in all affairs.

I took a light jog down the side of the island, in no real rush to get there. While I did have money, I was mostly hoping to find my friends milling about in the crowd. I knew for sure Fishlegs, Snotlout, and Tuffnut would be there, seeing as they were probably one of the first people to know that Johann was here in the first place. I could only hope that Ruffnut and the Elder had gotten word up on her lonely farm.

It took a few minutes, but soon enough I was on the waterlogged, squeaky dock. The ocean spray was frigid even through my thick coat, bringing with it the promise of ice. It was all the more reason for how packed Johann's ship was; the fact that he dared sail at all at this time of year was a surprise in itself.

The hustling sea of Vikings gave way about as easy as you'd expect. I squeezed past men and women carrying entire barrels and chests of findings and children playing with new toys and weapons their parents had bought them. None of my friends were in sight, although I do admit that it was stupid for me to expect to be able to find them in such a crowd.

Finally, the mass of people eventually thinned out at the "entrance" near the boat, blessing me with a tiny pocket of breathing space. Standing on my tiptoes, I scanned the ship for both walking room and familiar faces.

I'd just caught a glimpse of a large, squat boy with blonde hair when a rough shove nearly sent me crashing to the ground. I spun towards the idiot who'd walked into the only person _not _moving, growling, "_Hey!_ Watch where you'reâ€" "

My words died in my throat with a small, horrified squeak at Chief Stoick's surprised look. "Oh, sorry, Astrid," he apologized, continuing onto the ship without a second glance.

Spitelout followed closely behind his older brother, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Stoick, since when do _you_ listen to rumors?" He asked, his voice cracking and exhausted. Shoulders sagging, he continued, "Stoick, come on. It isn't worth it." He sighed when he was given no response, pinching the bridge of his nose.

_What? _I thought. _What's on there that's so bad?_

The crowd parted in respect behind the two, and I jumped into the

small void left behind, boarding Johann's boat and keeping as close as I dared. If the Chief was here with such an air of importance, then clearly something had happened. But why was Spitelout trying to drag him away? The guy had the mental stability of an expertly-trained warrior; the last time I'd seen him so upset was directly after Hiccup had been changed. If even _he _was stressed out, then it was serious.

A man with scraggly black hair, a very slick and long beard, and a tan cap took quick notice of the two and shouted a boisterous welcome. He beelined right on over and grabbed the Chief's shoulder with a sober, sympathetic expression. It took me a second to recognize him as Johann, having never seen him soâ€|somber.

I leaned forward to listen in on their conversation. Now I _knew _that something had happened, and something important at that! Was the village in danger? Maybe Johann hadn't come here to trade, but to provide a warning? Or maybe he knew why the dragons had avoided the island for weeks now!

That was when Fishlegs jumped directly in front of me with arms filled with scrolls and books and all but shrieked, "Hey, Astrid!"

"Fishlegs!" I gasped, barely able to stay grounded instead of flinching away in fright. "Hi! Uhâ€"

He held up his entire treasure trove packed in his arms, a huge grin sliding across his face. "Look at all these new documents I've got! There's a wealth of information on these that were just _waiting _to be found!" He shook said parchments a little bit, as if the knowledge would just sprinkle out of them.

My eyes drifted over to the now-inaudible conversation between the Chief, Spitelout, and Johann. "That's really great, Fishlegs, but, uhâ€"

Ever oblivious, he cut me off again. "_Oh!_ But I haven't gotten to the best part! You have to see this document here!" he somehow managed to shuffle through his collection without dropping a single page and produced a small journal, handing it to me.

The journal was leather-bound with no title. I flipped through it to find extremely detailed pictures of what looked like ocean titans, gods thousands of times larger than ships. They varied in size, shapes, and even limbs, but all shared on trait: they all seemed built to live in the water. On the last page was nothing but a signature by someone titled "The Sailor".

Eyebrows crinkling, I asked, "What is this, a fairytale book?"

Fishlegs shook his head with enough vigor to snap his neck. "Of course not! That's why it's so amazing!" He flipped to a page of a behemoth with a long, slender neck and six pairs of flippers, poking the page. "These ones are most common up in our waters, and because their bodies are so long we just assumed that they were sea serpents. But somehow someone managed to view the rest of its body and realized that they were a completely different species!"

I frowned at the description of the creature's height inscribed next to its drawing. "And how'd this Sailor guy manage to draw so many pictures of this so-called new species _without _having his boat crushed and drowning?" Shutting the book, I returned it to Fishlegs' pile, where it just barely managed to stay balanced.

"The same way we found so much out about dragons," he sang. "Constant studying, making sacrifices, and putting yourself right in the _jaws of death_ to find out what's inside!" He bounced in excitement, eyes aglow. "What a way to live, right?"

"Yeah, it does sound pretty neat," I said with a fond smile, remembering the countless nights I had stayed awake as a child daydreaming of conquering entire hordes of dragons. "But, uh, sorry to change the subject," I trailed off, glancing back over to the Chief and noting that he was scrutinizing a piece of parchment, "but do you know why the Chief and Spitelout are here looking so angry?"

Fishlegs bit his lower lip and managed to rap his fingers together. "Oh! Uh, wellâ€¦we don't really know _anything_, butâ€¦!"

I leaned in close, pulling on my most intimidating expression. "You know? Start talking."

Fishlegs' eyes swung back and forth, his grip on his tomes tightening. I refused to back down, keeping our faces inches apart, until he finally slumped in defeat and let loose an unnecessarily long whoosh of air. "Fine," he grouched. "Someone asked Johann about the dragons to see if there was any activity anywhere else. He says that he saw a dragon formation flying away from an island group that he was sailing to.

A bit surprising, considering dragons were usually only seen when they were in the middle of a raid. "And?" I pressed, crossing my arms and slouching.

The bookworm cast his eyes down, his expression solemn. "â€¦he saw two Night Furies."

My blood ran cold.

"I think I misheard you," I finally managed to choke out, trying to trick myself into believing that he'd just been speaking unclearly, that his words were lies. "You said he saw _two _Night Furies?" _Please say no. Please say no._

Fishlegs sighed again, sending away every ounce of hope I had left in me. "He even managed to get a picture," he said miserably, "and that's the one that Stoick and Spitelout are looking at. I'm sorry, Astrid," he added on as an afterthought, shifting his stack of goods in his arms as a distraction.

I felt my face go slack, my eyes blank. No. That was impossible. With their injuries, they couldn't have survived the flight. They _couldn't _have! They were half-dead, barely able to escape even with the element of surprise! They couldn't have made the journey all the way to Helheim's Gate! They didn't _deserve _to have lived through their punishment! That would make all of our sacrifices, all of our lost dreams and horrible new lives be in vain!

Without putting a single thought into it, I was sprinting past Fishlegs and pushing aside anyone who got in my way, stopping only when I was standing a little behind Chief Stoick's left-hand side. Our leader was just barely keeping a steady grip on the paper in his limp hands, his eyes distant and clouded. He clearly wasn't hearing a word of what Johann was going on about, and so the merchant had turned to address Spitelout and given me an opportunity to sneak up on the trio to get a look at the drawing.

Unfortunately, I had approached too fast, too loudly, and made no actual effort to look casual about leaning over and trying to glimpse at the paper. I really shouldn't have been surprised when Spitelout cut himself off and set me with a firm look that I'd seen several times on my father whenever he was about to ground me.

"Astrid," he reprimanded, "this doesn't involve you."

Heart hammering, on the edge of a complete and utter violent freakout, and certain that yes, the state of the two dragons that crushed the lives of my friends and myself did involve my attention, I openly defied him and stayed right where I was. "Is it true?" The demand came out panicked and edgy, causing me to scrunch my face up a bit in embarrassment. I masked it as anger, covering it up with the harshest tone I could muster, "Are they really alive?!"

Spitelout's eyebrows shot up and then sunk low over his eyes, his teeth gritting. He'd just gotten out the first syllable of what was likely a harsh scolding at my admittedly-shameful behavior when Chief Stoick brought up a hand, silencing his brother with a simple nod. He held the paper down to my viewing level and spread it out for me to see it in all of its devastating, detailed glory.

It showed a perfectly-angled flock of dragons, led by a single leader and each follower spreading out from behind and keeping the formation wider towards the back. It made them appear to be mimicking a sharpened sword, with the leader being the tapered edge, and the rest of the dragons forming the slope to it. The sheer fact that they were able to intellectually organize themselves such as that was horrifying enough—imagine if they put that much work into dragons raids and stopped attacking in mindless rage!—but it was two specific dragons in the drawing that made me grab a nearby post for support.

The leader had the now-recognizable silhouette of a Night Fury, and directly to its right was a much smaller one. I shook my head, trying to convince myself that there are plenty dragon species with that basic shape, but Johann was no flimsy artist; every dragon was detailed down to the spines, in the cases of the Nadders and Nightmares, and the shape of the Night Fury was unique in its own.

No! I thought, running a hand over my forehead and cheek. Gods damn it!

Johann walked over to my side and smiled in an attempt to comfort me. "I'm sorry, lass. I know how hard it is for you and your tribemates." His eyes flickered up to Chief Stoick in worry, and he went on, "I am absolutely positive that these are your dragons, though—especially

since I'd never seen a Night Fury until that night! In fact, it was the first time I've ever seen a flock like that before, but then again, the only time I've ever seen a flock is when they were comin' down on me!" He chuckled, shaking his head at some tender memories. "It's strange, thoughâ€|they didn't give a single wink of attention to poor ol' Johann. The little Fury was the only one to even spare a glance down at me, and only for a bit. He did just as I was looking up my telescope at him, and boy was he surprised! But then they just flew on their merry way, no rush at all. Like a tea party!"

"A tea party of death," Fishlegs moaned from behind, shambling up besides Johann to peer at the document himself. Taking it as a joke, the merchant let out a full-belly laugh, slapped Fishlegs on the shoulder, and returned to his previous spot in front of Chief Stoick and Spitelout.

Chief Stoick clenched his fists. "They're getting' cocky," he growled. "With two Night Furies, they think they're kings of the seas." He rolled the paper up and attached it to his belt, saying, "And you are positive of what you saw?"

Johann put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, my friend. But my eyes haven't given up on me just yet, and it matches up with the stories that I've been hearing throughout all of my travels," he said, gesturing at all of the assorted goods that he was carrying on his vessel.

Fishlegs perked up despite himself. "Stories?"

Johann held up a finger and jogged across the ship, unlocking a door and slipping inside. A few seconds later he returned with a thick journal in his hands, standing out of breath before us. "Whew! I keep a journal of my past whereabouts," he gasped, "and anything interesting things I hear on the islands I land. Gives me quite the gossip collection, some of them a miiight shady!" He beamed with an over-exaggerated wink and then opened it up and flipped to one of the pages closer to the back.

Clearing his throat, he read, "An elderly woman spoke of a ferocious attack unlike any other in her lifetime. The dragons seemed more motivated than ever before, described as nimble and deadly beasts instead of the bloodthirsty savages that the village had grown to expect and prepare for. The reason became clear soon into the bombardment: the return of the Night Fury! Gone for several weeks, the dragons had acted almost in a panicked vigor, a leader never clear, but now seemed properly synchronized under its command. But the unpleasant surprise was soon met with an even worse one: a second Night Fury! It followed the path of the first, sending towers crumbling from the skies, but sketched out its own deadly mark by lighting the nearby forests with its wicked fire and wreaking havoc on the farmlands, sending them all up in flames. The only food sources that were spared were the pastures, likely because other dragons were in them gathering up sheep and cattle._"

Nobody said anything. Hiccup flying with other dragons was understandableâ€|but attacking villages? It was so unlike him, so alien to his timid and thoughtful personality. He'd been uncomfortable even as a dragon to go on the offense, choosing to flee at the first given opportunity. He had barely been able to wield a sword when he was human, and now he was helping the dragons with

advanced warfare?

Johann turned a couple pages over. "This one is an account from the island I was heading to when I saw the flock. Apparently they had visited it." He paused to shake his head, disappointment painting his features. "—and the next day I learned that a little girl walking through the village during the festival encountered three mysterious dragons. She had seen them perched in a tree, lying in wait for an unseen second party. One big and dark, one small and nearly invisible against the tree they had chosen, and one incredibly tiny and bright green, sitting atop the head of the smaller dragon. From how the locals spoke of the smallest dragon, it was a Terrible Terror, while the other two were baffling and unknown. The little girl had but a second to react and try to call for help, and then the Terrible Terror leaped down from the tree and brutalized her, nearly ripping her throat out."

On the outside, it seemed like it wasn't an odd story—children were told to stay inside when dragons around for a reason. But why were they just hanging out on an inhabited island, presumably in the middle of the village?! And even more so, why were the two Night Furies present during this attack? They clearly just sat by and watched. But what were they doing there in the first place?

"A Terror?!" Fishlegs all but screamed, drawing my line of thoughts to an end. "They're Venom Class 12! One of the most poisonous dragons that regularly fly in raids! How did she survive?!"

"Woah, easy!" Johann soothed. "A neighbor heard her and got her help in time. She made a full recovery, although she was much more afraid to head out at night afterwards. But that's where the story ends—the girl can't remember anything after the Terror attacking her, just that it happened and eventually stopped. A shame, really," he said, pursing his lips and then shrugging.

Huffing, Johann went on, "It's strange, though. Those dragons had no reason to be at the village when there wasn't an attack. Nobody had a clue that they were present on their island. Not at all." His voice took on a warning tone as he spoke, the implications of his words made very clear.

Spitelout bristled, taking it as an insult. "What, do you doubt us? We would know if any dragons set a scale on our island! And if they ever dare to return to Berk, they'll wish they'd never hatched from their cursed eggs!" He spat.

"He's right," Chief Stoick pitched in, speaking calm and slow. "We've been preparing for weeks. Our warriors are strong and fierce. If the dragons do come back, they will realize their mistake very quickly."

Johann laughed good-naturedly, unfazed by the defensive tone both Vikings had taken on. "I wouldn't expect any less from the greatest warriors Berk has to offer." He slipped his journal into a pocket on the inside of his jacket and pressed, "Now, I'm sure this conversation has gotten to be quite the drag. I'm sorry to bring such terrible news—let me make it up to you. I've come across quite the assortment of weapons, including a jeweled double-sided axe that I think will catch your fancy something special!" He pushed the reluctant brothers further down the ship with shooing motions. The

traveler's attempts to cheer them up soon bore fruit when he pulled out the most beautiful weapon I'd ever seen, and they were sucked into a new conversation the second its wondrous metal sliced through sunlight.

Even from my distance from the Chief, I could tell that it was a distraction that he had needed more than anything. The drawing in his belt looked like a massive weight, something that would drag him down into the deepest crevices of the earth without hesitation.

"So, now what?" I asked Fishlegs, swiveling my head to look at him.

He shrugged. "Well, I still gotta buy all of these. But afterwardsâ€¦," he sighed. "Gods, how are we going to tell the others? How are we gonna tell _Snotlout?_" I winced at the very thought, and he repeated the expression at me in agreement. "The guy's gonna flip."

I was so not looking forward to that. "Everyone's gonna find out eventually. We should tell the others as soon as possibleâ€¦" where are Snotlout and Tuffnut, anyways?" I realized, going on tiptoes to look for them. Why would Fishlegs, under the same apprenticeship, have a break but not them?

"They got to go here earlier," Fishlegs explained. "We did it in shifts, and I was the last one. I know they don't know, though, because I saw Johann pull aside a messenger to go get Stoick and Spitelout while I was looking through the scrolls. But, uh, I'm kinda pushing my time right nowâ€¦" he trailed off, eyes flicking nervously and inching towards the deck.

With a nod I said, "Alright. Let's meet on the edge of the village tonight, near that abandoned torch tower."

Fishlegs nodded and hurried off to complete his expensive purchase, leaving me to stand alone with my thoughts. It felt so unreal, how quickly something can progress out of controlâ€¦ especially when it's unexpected. It felt like nothing was solid and stable, that anything could happen in this crazy world. I felt like I wouldn't bat an eye if the ship suddenly came to life and declared itself a citizen of Berk, we'd been forced through so much.

There was one stable rock, one fact I knew for sure, though: tonight was _not_ going to be pleasant.

* * *

><p>Due to my parents deciding they wanted a family fun night, I was the last one to jog up the hill to the tower. As expected, everyone else was there: Snotlout and Tuffnut were wrestling, Ruffnut was egging them on with as many obnoxious and obscene "encouragements" as she could, and Fishlegs was buried in one of his new books.<p>

"Hey, guys!" I shouted, waving at them.

Both Snotlout and Tuffnut were too involved in their fight, offering struggled "Hey!"s and going right back to smashing each other's faces into the ground. Fishlegs set his novel down and walked on over, joined by a reluctant Ruffnut.

"What took you so long?" Ruffnut complained, slouching over and letting her arms dangle. "I was so. Bored. The only thing keeping me from jumping off that cliff over there just for some _excitement _was those two idiots having another man fight," she grouched.

Well, that explains why they're so serious, I thought as I watched Snotlout literally raise Tuffnut over his head, throw him to the ground, and attempt to jump on top of him. The twin managed to scramble out of the way and jumped on top of Snotlout's, wringing the bigger teen's arm behind his back and digging his feet into Snotlout's skull.

"My parents wanted me to stay and have family time," I groaned. Both Ruffnut and Fishlegs jumped away as if I'd caught the plague.

Putting a hand on my shoulder, Ruffnut said, "That _sucks._ My parents stopped doing that ages ago."

"Mine didn't," Fishlegs said, crossing his arms and pouting. "We have 'fun days' once a month. My mom seems to think that once I'm older I'm just going to forget about her and my dad, and so most of the time it's just them talking about how I was like when I was a kid." He shuddered. "Trust me, there are things that are better left unsaid! I don't need to know how many times my dad accidentally left me outside during a dragon raid because he wanted an extra dragon head for his collection."

"Hah!" Ruffnut snorted. "Sucks to be you. What'd your parents even make you do, anyways?" She asked me with an expectant smirk.

I gave her a flat look. "Word games. And then she tried to get me to bake with her."

Ruffnut burst out laughing, while Fishlegs took the more polite route and allowed himself a smile. I put on my most believable scorned look and placed a hand on my hip, saying, "â€|it's not _that _funny."

"Yeah, but, you see," Ruffnut pointed her index finger at me, stopping inches from my nose, "I've been working on a _farm. _There's _nothing _fun there. Nothing! I'm so depraved ofâ€|fun stuffâ€|that _everything _is a huge kick to me!" She yelled out the last part, waving her arms about frantically.

Fishlegs did his best to look and sound sympathetic. "That'sâ€|rough."

My friend shrugged it off. "Not as rough as Astrid's charades and pretty-pretty pastries," she chuckled.

Any response I could manage was drowned out when Snotlout, far behind us, screamed, "_I WIN! _Did you see that, guys?" When we all turned around to see him standing a few meters away from Tuffnut, he groaned, "Ugh, weren't you guys watching? I was totally kicking butt."

"You were _not!_" Tuffnut screeched in indignation, swatting his rival on the shoulder.

"Oh, well," Ruffnut said. "Guess you have to do it again." Both men's eyes widened as they glanced at each other, and then her twin smacked Snotlout one last time before striding over.

Holding his hands behind his neck, Tuffnut asked, "So why are we here, anyways? Fishlegs didn't say _anything_. And we've been here _forever_." He moaned the last word out, hanging his head back.

"Oh, please, like you have better things to do." Snotlout rolled his eyes. "Besides getting your ass handed to you by me, that is." He 'added', studying his fingernails.

"Hey! I'll show youâ€"!"

"Guys," I interrupted, "while we'd love to watch you two rumble again, there's a reason why we're here."

Ruffnut gave me an odd look. "Yeah, what _was _the point of this, anyways? I'm going to be, like, _exhausted _tomorrow." Her twin took no time to voice his agreement, making it apparent that I shouldn't have taken my time sneaking out.

"Wellâ€"|" I stopped, trying to think of a proper way to word it. Eventually I just settled for brutally honest and blunt, and blurted out, "Johann brought news from other villages with him. There's been sightings of two Night Furies."

The easy grins fell from all three of their faces, their skin paling against the inky night sky.

Snotlout was the first to speak. "Whatâ€"kind of sightings?" He almost whispered. He appeared to be trying to keep his composure, but his fear was betrayed in his wide, unfocused eyes.

I looked at Fishlegs, who couldn't help but return my defeated look. "Snotlout," he began, "it'sâ€"not good. I-I don't think it would be a good ideaâ€"I mean, they, uh, there's been a lot of cases, butâ€""

"Just spit it out already!" Hiccup's cousin demanded, his body going rigid and fists clenching at his sides.

"They attacked villages," I stepped in, knowing that Snotlout would continue to take out his misplaced anger on Fishlegs if he continued speaking. "Johann even saw them fly overhead. Apparently one of them just knocks down watch towers like usual, but another goes around and sets crops and forests on fire." I paused to let that sink in and sighed, "Andâ€"there's another thing."

Snotlout narrowed his eyes, but Tuffnut was the one to speak up. "What else is there?" His voice was low and dangerousâ€"nothing like the goofy, airheaded tone we were all used to. It was the same tone of voice my father had used when he'd forced me to explain myself after the Chief informed him of what we had all been doing with Hiccup. It was the manner of speaking of a person who wanted to believe that their situation couldn't get any worse even when they knew that it was about to. So strange coming from _Tuffnut_, I froze in incomprehension alone.

"They were caught inside a village on a peaceful night," Fishlegs intervened for me. "They wouldn't have even been noticed if a little girl hadn't seen them hiding in a tree. She wasâ€|attacked by a Terror shortly afterwards. She survived, butâ€|" he shook his head.

But that means dragons are on our islands much more often than we thought, he left unsaid.

"Man," Ruffnut breathed after a long silence. "Justâ€|I never thought that he'd, you know, _do _that."

"Are you okay, Snotlout?" I asked, having not taken my eyes off of his shaking fists and reddened face since his earlier outburst.

A set of agonized eyes settled on mine. "No," he hissed. "No. I'm not." He turned away, facing the tower, and let a furious scream rip from his throat. "_Gods damn it!_" Snotlout howled, pounding a fist hard enough into the rickety structure to send little chips flying off. "That traitor! What in theâ€"how could heâ€"?! _Damn it!_" He hurled a fist into it once more and leaned against it, his entire body shaking in outrage.

His voice almost inaudible, he seethed, "And I thought he would go to a deserted island and _freaking stay_ there."

Tuffnut placed a hand on his taught shoulder. "We all did, bro," he consoled. He opened his mouth to continue, but at the lack of response just shook his head, his blonde hair swaying back and forth. "At leastâ€|at leastâ€|wellâ€|" he stopped when he couldn't think of anything optimistic to say.

The conversation and good mood sapped out of us, we just stood around for the longest time. The moon cast a dim and regretful light upon us and the forest seemed subdued, like the life inside of it was mourning the loss that our village had received over and over and over again. It felt like a mistake, I thought to myself, to call our group together for the first time in weeks just to give them such gods-awful news, even though I knew that hearing it secondhand would have been just as bad, even worse. At least they were with friends and not, say, working when they learned the horrible truth. Right?

Watching Snotlout take his anger out on the tower, Tuffnut at his side, and Ruffnut and Fishlegs planted like frightened deer with blank eyes, I doubted it.

* * *

><p>By the time that Snoggletog started to come around, we knew that it was going to be one of the colder ones. The ice had come in about a week earlier than expected, and we had had a nonstop blizzard for a few days, leaving snow up to my hips in some places. The houses looked like giant, snowy hills instead of buildings, and actual hills were hidden as the snow filled up to their crests. It was impossible to leave most homes, and the lucky few who could wisely decided that staying inside was probably a better idea than going outside and risking falling a meter into the snow.<p>

And I was _ecstatic!_

With such thick snow and ice, it was impossible for anyone to leave their house, let alone go shopping for bread. That meant that for nearly a week, I was free from Bergthora's shop! Even she seemed relieved, since the snowfall coincided with the holiday almost perfectly. Sad as it was, she had told me that she'd spent the last few years' Snoggletogs in the bread shop waiting for the customers needing last-minute supplies to rush in. It was a great profit, apparently, but she'd spoken of those times as if they were burdens. With such a young daughter, I didn't blame her.

A day of being trapped inside passed, leaving Berk to fall into a lethal wasteland that made the exciting turn of events show its more dangerous nature. But eventually the sun did its work, and the sleet became thin enough to allow us to tunnel our ways out like burrowing animals. At first it was good news—we could actually go outside again!—but then the fear that Bergthora would change her mind about closing the shop took hold of me in its icy grip.

The first thing I did once my Mom, Dad, and I had kicked the snow out of our entryway was head on over to her house, biting my lower lip somewhat nervously. Bergthora's daughter answered the door before I'd even knocked twice, much to my surprise. She beamed, squealed, and ran inside the house screaming her head off that "Astrid's coming over to play!" over and over and _ugh._

Kids are cute and all, but—well, never mind.

Bergthora shushed her daughter away and stood in the doorway. "Astrid! Why're you here and not inside?" She gestured at the snow tunnel that towered above me.

I chuckled. "Eh, it's not too bad outside. I just came by to make sure that the shop was still closed—?" I trailed off, my voice rising in hope.

My mentor nodded, and I about fell to the ground in relief. "Yep! Perfect excuse, this snow!" She laughed deep from her chest and winked at me. "My poor ol' shop's just gone _misiin'!_"

"I don't know how we're gonna find it!" I said. "I guess we'll just have to look—_after_ Snoggletog."

Shaking her head, Bergthora bemoaned, "Oh, darn the luck. How the fates have worked against us!" We shared a laugh, and then she nudged my shoulder. "Now, you run along and go be with yer family, Astrid. I'll see you after Snoggletog."

I wore the biggest grin I'd had in months on the way home.

* * *

><p>The next day brought with it a pleasant surprise: the Snoggletog tree was being set up in the village center!<p>

I discovered this on my way to Ruffnut's, who had also been given the rest of the season until after Snoggletog off. The sight of the giant "tree" made up of blocks of wood, decorative shields, and bells never failed to put a smile on my face. The festivity of the holiday had landed it right into my favorite time of the year, and I had to admit

that it rubbed off on me. I was determined to make this year's as great as the last.

"A little to the left!" A woman working on the tree yelled. The man who had climbed halfway up shot her an annoyed look and placed a string of bells a few inches over. "A bit to the right now!"

I stopped to watch the construction for a bit, noting with amusement that the woman never did get her bells exactly where she wanted. But Ruffnut was waiting for me, and I continued to kick my way through the snow, allowing my eyes to wander to all of the houses and people. Everyone was hanging up decorations, and a few were even hauling in wood to set up trees of their own. I couldn't help but notice that a lot of the work was done almost mechanically, like it was a forced action.

The few that caught my eye offered waves, which meant that the season's cheer hadn't _completely_ _burnt_ out. But still!

Ruffnut was waiting for me outside her house with two steaming mugs clutched in her hands. "'Sup?" She said when I approached, tossing me the mug and forcing me to dive to catch it.

I gave her a short glare and got to my feet, staring down at the contents that I'd just faceplanted in the snow for. "Uh, what am I looking at?" I asked warily, trying to put a name to the goopy brown stuff I was looking at.

"Dunno." Ruffnut took a huge swig of hers and belched. "Don't care. Mom made it and it tastes good, and that's all that matters to me!"

"Well, at least you're easy to please," I said, risking a sip of the stuff. It tastedâ€|thick, and a lot like some sort of gamey, lean meat. While an odd flavor, it wasn't _bad_, and was a welcome treat with the freezing air and snow all-encompassing.

Waitâ€|

"You know," I said, "people seem a bit down this season. I was thinking about doing something special."

Ruffnut raised an eyebrow. "Like what?" She downed the rest of hers and frowned in disappointment when holding it upside-down didn't make any more magically appear.

I held the mug up, beaming. "A holiday drink!"

It was a little disappointing when she laughed. "Haven't you learned that you _suck_ _at_ cooking?" Ruffnut snickered, leaning against her house.

"Yeah, _bread_," I countered. "C'mon, let's go inside and work on something."

Ruffnut made an exaggerated comment about burning the whole village down. It did nothing to dampen my spirits; this was going to be awesome!

* * *

><p>It was totally awesome.

I called the new holiday drink "Yaknog", and it was a hit! People liked it so much that when they took a sip, they took their time to swallow. They always seemed to be surprised by the flavor, too, which was even better. We'd nailed it!

It was just what the village needed!

* * *

><p>The day of Snoggletog passed in a flurry of excitement. Helmets were filled with goodies and weapons, feasts were prepared and dined on, and families were brought together to look forward to the coming spring. My parents and I celebrated, exchanged gifts, and looked in our helmets to see what Odin had left behind. We generally just took the day to relax, waiting for the festival that was going to be held in Town Hall that everyone in Berk was likely to attend.<p>

So when we reached Town Hall soaked to our knees in snowmelt, I was quick to ditch my parents in search of my friends. It wasn't that I was tired of themâ€|well, no, it actually was. A warrior can only handle so many hours of reminiscing and tales of "when you were this big" and more "family fun games" (which Dad was more than happy to draw out as long as he could) before it gets old. On top of that, I hadn't seen anyone but Ruffnut in weeks; the boys were often too busy with their training to hang out, and after Tuffnut rudely informed me that our little get-together that night so long ago had completely thrown off their sleep schedules and earned them stern lectures from their superiors, I felt too guilty to just call us together so we could hang out.

But now that it was Snoggletog, I was prepared to use all of our free time to its fullest!

All of the tables had been set off to the side, allowing room for the villagers to mingle and be cheery. Decorative plants, bells, and even a few rare ribbons were strung about, and the torches that filled the mess hall provided it with a homey glow that was reminiscent of a warm summertime sunset. The tables had all been pushed to the side, but were largely occupied by the children of Berk playing "Defend Your Castle" and climbing up and down them like frantic Terrors.

For quite a bit I pushed my way through the ocean of people, standing on tiptoes and searching with a touch of desperation for a least one of my friends. It was only after several minutes that I eventually glanced over at the tables and noticed, to my extreme embarrassment, that plenty of people were seated.

Including Fishlegs and Snotlout.

They were at a table parallel to me, giving me a perfect view of them and keeping me out of their sight unless they happened to glance over. My shouted hello was engulfed from all of the surrounding noise, and even if it wasn't, I doubted they would hear me. Fishlegs was swinging his arms about with a massive grin, detailing something with all the joy his heart could muster. I could just hear his excited voice raise steadily over the crowd, a bad habit he had yet to squash.

Snotlout's expression made it abundantly clear that he'd likely have more interest in watching ice melt than listen to whatever Fishlegs was speaking about. His eyes were half-closed and his mouth drooped open, one palm pressing against his cheek so hard that the eye above it was almost pressed shut.

Once I was a few feet away from the two, Fishlegs finally caught sight of me and interrupted himself with a casual "Hey, Astrid" before launching right back into his explanation of the properties of fireballs that hindered their flight path when launched from certain catapults. He continued on while I sat down, empathizing with Snotlout on a whole new level when he started to go into numbers and weights and other technical terms that I had never bothered to read about when preparing myself to be a warrior. I mean, yeah, I'd read the Book of Dragons, but not the Book of the Procedures to Launch a Really Big Stone Set on Fire Properly!

"Please tell me you're here to rip my ears out," Snotlout groaned, his hand sliding from his head and thunking on the table.

"Hey!" Fishlegs said. "You told me that you thought that stuff was interesting. I was merely broadening your horizons."

Snotlout couldn't have looked more unimpressed. "Yeah, but not all that math stuff. I just like the killing part. Squishing the enemy. With fire."

"Actually, the stones are what do most of the damage," Fishlegs corrected, at the same time that I said, "That really is the best part, though." I couldn't help but smirk when the nerd turned his entire body around just to shoot me a flat look.

Snotlout, eager to skimp out on learning, straightened his posture. "Thank you, Astrid. Now can we please talk about fun stuff."

"Physics is fun," Fishlegs grumbled, much to my confusion.

Wracking my brain on what little knowledge on the subject I had, I asked, "Wait, but I thought you were talking about catapultsâ€|?" The words spilled out of my mouth with naÃ¬ve interest, and I only noticed Snotlout's various "STOP!" gestures once it was too late.

And that was how we ended up getting schooled by Fishlegs for over an hour. Snotlout blatantly stopped listening, slamming his forehead into the table repeatedly, while I just plastered a confused smile on and nodded when it felt like I should. I'm no idiot, but I'm not much of a scholar either. I spent my time studying dragons, having chosen my career as a dragon-killer since early childhood. I'd never once given much thought to anything else. Including catapults. And "aerodynamics".

In the end, we were saved from our imminent deaths via boredom when Ruffnut and Tuffnut came to our rescue, nearly knocking each other out trying to be the first ones to get to the table. They lasted about two seconds before chasing away "smart nerd talk" with loud disdain.

In the middle of it all Snotlout mouthed to me, "Never. Again." My head hurt so much, all I could do was nod and try to focus on Tuffnut as he pushed Fishlegs aside and declared that his "that one time I almost shot my dad in the face with an arrow" story was the best thing _ever._ Ruffnut scoffed and countered with her "that one time I found an arm in the field" story (which I'd heard about a dozen times by now), only to have Snotlout try to stand her up with his "that one time I caught an eel _with my face_" tale. And, well, to be honest, my "that one time I kicked a tree and an angry wildcat fell out of it" story beat all of theirs to next Snoggletog.

We went on like this as the room filled up with more people, families mixing together and laughing and just enjoying each other's company.

All families, that is, except one.

The Chief and his brother stood off to the side, their expressions grim as they discussed amongst themselves. They were turned away from everyone else, their heads low and their eyes downcast. Nobody needed to ask why they seemed so upset on Snoggletog, and nobody approached them. Their grief was like a pathogen, though, spreading to anybody who took notice of them and put any semblance of thought into their alienation.

Although it gave me a heavy frown, I didn't mention it to the others. But they aren't stupid people, and the more the gloomy atmosphere swept over its victims, the more noticeable it became. The roar of voices, like that of ocean waves on a busy day, dwindled down to a still sea.

Gobber approached the two and waved his bell-decorated hook around, yammering on passionately. Chief Stoick crossed his arms, looked down, and sighed. While I couldn't read lips very well at such a distance (and with so many people walking into my view), the word "Valhallarama" was unmistakable. He cracked a tiny smile and his friend gave him a firm slap on his back, yelling "That's the spirit!" at the top of his lungs and dragging him into the crowd with a slightly amused Spitelout in tow.

With their Chief out of his slump for the time being and finally starting to celebrate with about as much determination to make this Snoggletog a good one as me, the people of Berk began to return to their usual merry selves, singing and laughing again. Still, the upbeat mood that we had had when I had first entered Town Hall never quite reached its crest again, making me feel a little jipped.

"Well, this drags," Tuffnut said, drawing muttered agreements from the rest of us.

I looked out at the crowd again, and then to my friends' slightly crestfallen faces. Standing up, I insisted, "Come on, guys! This is Snoggletog! We shouldn't be sitting here moping around, we should be _celebrating!_"

"I say we bail," Snotlout agreed, as ready as I was to abandon the doom and gloom.

Neither Ruffnut nor Tuffnut seemed to care where we went, as long as we all stuck together. Fishlegs looked a little nervous, but after taking in the rest of Town Hall one more time, made up his mind that staying inside was just depressing.

We snuck out as sneakily as five well-known, rowdy teenagers could—which was actually quite impressive. Picking a street that led directly to Loki's Mountain, we began to wander down the outskirts of Berk, the snow underfoot thunderous in the quiet. The snow made the moonlight almost burst with light, outlining the frozen landscape as clear as the sun and providing a rare glimpse of what the village looked like when it was completely empty. There was an enormous cluster of clouds on the horizon, and a wind was coming off of them, promising more bad weather.

We actually passed very close to my house, and I straightened up. "Hey, guys! I got an idea to make everyone merrier!"

They stopped, and I paused for dramatic effect before pitching, "We could make more Yaknog! To drink away the pain!"

It was a bit jarring to have all four of them yell, "_NO!_" I reared back at the unexpected rebuttal and then flipped my hair in dismissal, trying to fight back a pout. It took too long to make it, anyways.

In an attempt to lighten the mood after shooting down my awesome idea, Fishlegs said, "So, uh, how was your guys' days?"

"Up until just now? Awesome!" Ruffnut hooted.

"I ate _everything!_" Tuffnut added.

"Well, I got a new sword, so, I've got that goin' for me!" Snotlout bragged, swiping his hand through the air with an imaginary weapon.

"Really?" Fishlegs perked up. "I got a buncha new books!"

They all looked at me expectantly. I sighed in fake exasperation and said, "Family fun time."

The teasing lasted _way_ longer than it should have. Biting my lower lip, I knelt down and grabbed a bundle of snow, casually molding it into an icy ball of death while my friends continued to make fun of me, unaware of their imminent doom.

Tuffnut was the first to fall. The snowball hit him like Thor's hammer, landing directly in his face with a loud _SMACK_ that sent him to the ground shrieking, "_OH, I am hurt! I am very much hurt!_" He held his battle wound tenderly, undoubtedly trying to bring feeling back to his skin with the warmth of his hands, while I crossed my arms and stared down my nose at him like a hawk.

"You were saying?" I inquired politely as his sister, Snotlout, and Fishlegs let loose a long string of "_oooooh_"s.

My opponent recovered quick enough to grab a fistful of snow and lob it towards me, his aim centering on my face. I ducked and rolled, scooping up a snowball as I went and hurling it right at his nose the

moment I was upright again. Baffled by my overdramatic retaliation, Tuffnut sat upright and allowed himself to get a facefull of snow. Again.

And thus, the war began.

Ruffnut joined my side the moment she took advantage of her twin's shock and shoved him into the snowbank. Fishlegs, in an effort to tear her off of him, planted himself in my line of fire and was subjected to an accidental snowballing. Snotlout was content in standing on the sidelines, crossing his arms and snickering as Ruffnut and I pulverized the other two.

That would change.

"Come on, Snotlout!" I shouted, ducking beneath a double-throw and handing Ruffnut an extra chunk I'd made. "Don't just stand there!"

"Yeah, you gotta make it at least a _little _fair!" Ruffnut added, smashing Tuffnut to the ground with what looked more like a block of ice than snow and then tossing a much-gentler ball of snow at Fishlegs (who dove out of the way to avoid his teammate's fate).

Snotlout scoffed. "A _little?_ I think me joining them would tip the odds in their favor _quite_ a bit. But, if you insist," he shrugged and gathered up some snow in his hands, abruptly spinning towards me and forcing me to jump out of the way.

But it was a feint! By targeting me, he'd just been luring Ruffnut into a sense of safety, and she was struck dead-on by a second assault!

With Ruffnut staggered and myself out of ammo, we were sitting targets. The boys saw their chance and roared battle cries, charging as one!

"Retreat!" Ruffnut squeaked, spinning on her heel and darting into the wilderness behind us. There was a small clearing before the forest sprung up on the rising slope of Loki's Mountain, and for just a moment I thought we would be pinned. The edge of my vision caught something out of the ordinary, and I was met with the beautiful sight of our salvation!

Jogging ahead of my comrade, I ordered, "Follow me!" Taking a sharp turn, I lead us towards where the hill was at its steepest and jumped right into the thickets, using the trunks as leverage to pull me up. Judging by the loud huffing behind me, Ruffnut was not too far behind.

Fishlegs seemed to realize my plan and shouted, "Quick! Make them fall! _Now!_"

The air was filled with sharp whistling as snowballs sprung from the abyss below. Poor Ruffnut had the misfortune of climbing behind me and so took the brunt of the assault, but that didn't mean that I was completely spared. A few of the weapons hit their mark, snapping into me with a sharp sting of pain and cold, followed by the numbing of skin. I wasn't about to let such a flawless plan slip from my grasp,

though!

Directly above us, a sharp stone jutted out of the ground, providing precious flat ground to stabilize ourselves on. I clambered on and pulled Ruffnut up with me just as snowballs whipped centimeters overhead. We lay flat on our bellies and peered over the edge of our small ground, staring down the boys while they strategized. They knew that going after us while we had the high ground would be a lethal mistake, and all three of them looked upset that they had not chased after us to stop us in time. The hill was so massive that we were almost looking straight down at them.

I nudged Ruffnut and gestured for her to watch me. Jumping straight up into a low crouch, I steadied myself for a breath. Then I launched myself off the stone.

The branch I'd been aiming for was a little bit higher than I'd calculated, but I still managed to grab onto it right at its base and shake with all my might! The snow accumulated not only on the branch, but also on the entire portion of the tree, shifted and dropped all at once, straight down to our enemies! They had but a moment to stare openmouthed at their doom before the giant pile of snow plopped right on them.

I braced myself against the trunk and pushed off it, just barely managing to get back on the ledge with Ruffnut's help.

"That was awesome!" She cried, giving me a stinging high-five.
"Nowâ€œ"

"_CHARGE!_" Snotlout bellowed below, jumping out of the pile with ease and racing up the incline with reckless determination. Worse still, Fishlegs and Tuffnut were right at his heels!

Try as we might, Ruffnut and mine's tiny platform was just too small for both of us to stand up to defend ourselves on without risking one of us being pushed off. We were forced to retreat, shooting back up the hill again just to keep them from getting to us. There was a step just a little bit further ahead, a point where half of the hill cut off flat and fell. The rest evolved into the higher portion of the mountain. If we could make it up there with enough time to spare, we could find better ground to fight them off!

Ruffnut got there first, twirled, and pulled me the rest of the way up. To our right the flattened area continued. To our left the earth rose again, too high for even Vikings to climb. Behind us, Loki's Mountain dropped with just as much intensity as before into a small valley devoid of trees, lit only by moonlight and filled to the brim with a lake of silver-blue snow.

In front of us, the guys were sprinting with all their might, ready to draw metaphorical blood.

"Time to _kick ass_," Ruffnut declared, packing snow in her hands with an open-toothed smirk.

I gathered my own up and waitedâ€œ|and waitedâ€œ|

The horns of Snotlout's helmet came into view and I paused for just a second, firing off my snow and ducking for more before I even saw it

hit its mark. Ruffnut grunted as she did the same (Fishlegs yelped soon after, revealing who had been hit), and when I rose up again Snotlout and Tuffnut had managed to claw their way up to our high ground!

I threw the snowball directly at Snotlout's head and then dodged Tuffnut hurling a tree branch (of all things, a tree branch?) at me. At that point Fishlegs had returned, and he struck when I was unable to get out of the way with a hunk of ice as wide as my stomach! The massive bludgeon struck me dead-center and I fell backwards, drawing in a sharp hiss of air before recovering by somersaulting backwards. Ruffnut, distracted, suffered the same fate via her brother, and I leaped in front of her to act as a shield when she failed to execute the same move I did.

Snotlout charged again, aiming to end the battle and forcing me to back up dangerously close to the edge. Acting on reflexes alone, I stooped low and delivered a round kick right into his gut. While he doubled over backwards I spun him around, hooked his foot with my own, and sent him sprawling on his stomach into the ground. Ruffnut rushed forward and, two snowballs in tow, planted a foot on his back and tossed one at Fishlegs (which hit his shoulder and didn't really do anything) and then the other at Tuffnut (which knocked his ball out of his hand).

We reached a standstill. With their leader pinned, Fishlegs and Tuffnut hesitated to strike, providing me all the time in the world to scoop up more snow. The impasse was broken when Snotlout waved at his allies to go anyways, causing Tuffnut to sprint towards his sister in a flying tackleâ€œ

â€œand send them right over the crest!

"Not good!" Fishlegs panicked, rushing to my side in an instant while Snotlout scrambled to his feet in a blur. We watched the twins tumble down in a flurry of snow, sending up a cloud of the stuff in their wake. I bit my lip hard, my eyes wide as I placed my hand over my mouth, realizing all too late that we had gone too far.

With a silent puff, they reached the bottom of the hill.

For the worst five seconds of my life, everything was as stagnant as death.

Then Tuffnut's laughter crept up, followed soon after by him and Ruffnut bursting out of the thick snow below. "Wooaah!" He hooted, pumping his fists in the air. "We gotta do that again!"

"Yeah, you guys should try it!" Ruffnut hollered, knocking helmets with Tuffnut.

I pressed my palm to my forehead, trying to calm my racing heart. That was too close.

Snotlout stared down the bare hill they'd fallen, slick with ice, and said, "Uuuh, how they getting' back up?" At my confused lookâ€œthey'd just climb back up, duhâ€œhe pointed down at them.

Tuffnut was struggling to claw his way up the dents they'd made in the snow to no avail. He slid down no more than a few meters up each

time, even if he chose a fresh patch to try and pull himself through. Ruffnut shoved him aside, sending him to the ground, and attempted to do the same. She was just as unsuccessful.

Fishlegs, Snotlout, and I shared a glance. Then we focused on the very-unclimbable hill.

"I guessâ€|we getâ€|rope?" I suggested.

Fishlegs groaned. "Great. This can't get possibly get any worse. And on Snoggletog, too!"

Oh, gods. Why did he have to say that? He was supposed to be the _smart _one!

As if playing a cruel joke on us, there was a muffled _crack! _from directly below. The snow the three of us were standing on sunk several centimeters deeper in the blink of an eye. Before we could properly react, there was a final snap, the feeling of the ground underfoot crumbling awayâ€|!

I settled for a mindless scream when we found ourselves tumbling down, the world suddenly becoming a mass of formless black and white.

"_Fishlegs I hate yooouuu!_" Snotlout howled somewhere off to my left. I doubted he was heard, judging by the high-pitched shrieks coming from my other side. Clenching my eyes shut and reminding myself over and over that Ruffnut and Tuffnut had just survived this fall with no injuries, I tucked my arms and knees in and allowed myself to roll all the way until I hit a much rougher and resistant patch. I skidded for an extra second, feeling the sting of the snow on my everything, and opened my eyes to an endless expanse of _white_.

Groaning, I rolled over and stood up on shaky legs, seriously questioning the twins' definition of what was and wasn't "fun". The two were standing off to the side, howling with laughter over our apparent wipeout. As if they had done a better job at landing.

Wobbling to my feet, I craned my neck and looked upâ€|and upâ€|and upâ€|

The drop had seemed steep from the _top. _But from down here, it looked like it was a giant cliff! We could try to climb up the trails we'd left behind, but it was more of a vertical incline than a horizontal one. With the snow so smooth, especially after we were so kind to flatten it into ice with our bodies, it would be nearly impossible to get out of the valley from the way we'd come.

There was another thing. Because I was looking almost straight up, I had a nice view of the sky. Or, at least, the clouds that were filling it up like a silent landslide. The storm I had noticed before had moved in as silent and deadly as a Night Fury, and even as I began to process this a few snowflakes began to flit down from the sky.

We needed to get back to the village, and fast.

Ruffnut must have followed my eyes, because she smacked her forehead and said, "Great. _More _snow." Then her eyes widened as she realized what that meant. "Waitâ€|" She walked up to the cliff we'd all just fallen over and patted its smooth surface. "More snow."

"_Shit_," Tuffnut stated after a long silence.

Snotlout turned to Fishlegs with half-lowered eyelids and said, "Just for the record, this is totally your fault."

"What?!" Fishlegs stopped his ceaseless finger-tapping to place his hands on his hips. "_I'm _not the one who drove those two towards the cliff. It's not my fault that the snow gave out!"

"Yeah, but you just _had _to jinx us!" Snotlout persisted.

Fishlegs rolled his eyes and was snapping back something about superstitions not being real most of the time when Ruffnut shoved her hands in both of their faces and snarked, "Hey, morons! Mind fightin' later?" The thunderclouds above rumbled, providing everyone the proper motivation to get their acts together.

The only problem wasâ€|well, it was difficult to decide what to do. We were currently standing in a medium-sized field almost glowing with crisp snow. A thick forest of pines sprung up from its borders, each tree appearing to grow taller the further it was away from us. We were at the bottom of a bowl made of mountains and forests, essentially.

Fishlegs took a few steps in one direction, stopped, and then went a different way. "Maybe if weâ€|no, that won't workâ€|that way looks a little less steep butâ€|" His mumbling grew softer with each botched plan, until he eventually stopped talking altogether. The twins were also talking quietly amongst themselves, while Snotlout a little ways beside me with a rather impressive imitation of Chief Stoick's composure set on his face, his face scrunched up as he probably thought harder than he ever had in his life.

"Don't worry, Fishlegs." I kept my voice as calm as possible as I spoke. "We'll be fine. We just have toâ€|uhâ€|" I stopped when everyone turned to look at me. I cringed. While it wasn't unusual for me to be the leader most of the time, I hadn't done a really good job at it. What if I made another wrong decision? What if I got someone hurt, or worse?

_Get a grip! _I berated myself, ripping my eyes off of the others and scanning the environment. _It's not going to be like that._

Taking a deep breath, I said, "We can't go all the way across to the other side. We'd just be further from Berk. And this one here is out of the questionâ€|so that leaves those two." I pointed to the inclines directly perpendicular to us. As I did, a plan began to form, and I continued with much more confidence, "The one on the right turns into that mountain up on the ledge we fell from. That means it's too steep to get over. So we have to climb up the one on the left and backtrack as close to Berk as we can, then climb down it once we're sure we know where we are. That sound good to you guys?"

Snotlout smirked. "All of your plans do." His grin quickly fell, and

he looked away, amending, "Andâ€|yeah. Sounds good."

"Time to be awesome!" Tuffnut declared, pushing Ruffnut aside to get in front of her. In the same tone, he continued, "Even though we'll probably get in trouble!"

Everyone groaned at the prospect of _more _trouble. "But we're trying to get _out _of it," Fishlegs whined. "Maybe if we hurry, nobody will notice we're gone?"

"It's worth the shot," I mumbled, knowing that each word was a lie. It would take forever to scale that small mountain. My parents were going to be _furious._ Just standing around talking about how much trouble we were going to be in wasn't going to help, though. I began walking as fast as I could without wearing my legs out in the thick snow, the others quickly falling into place around me.

It hadn't even been a minute before I swung my leg forward, expecting to feel the firm ground underneath meâ€|only for it to give out beneath me. For a terrifying moment I envisioned myself falling down a cliff again. I stumbled ahead with a gasp and straightened, the snow now up to my mid-thigh. My heart hammered in my ears, but it didn't mask the grunts and yelps of the others as they each fell victim to the deep pit as well.

Knee-deep in and covered with a thin dusting of snow, Snotlout groused, "Fishlegs, I hate you."

* * *

><p>By the time we had tunneled halfway through the field, the storm had shifted from gentle to furious. We were forced to move single-file, the largest in the front to clear out the snow for the rest of us. That left Fishlegs leading us, followed by Snotlout, Ruffnut, myself, and Tuffnut. I had wanted to bring up the back at first, but Tuffnut was very insistent on where he wanted to be, his eyes never straying from his sister for too long. Likewise, Ruffnut couldn't stop checking over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure that her brother was still there.<p>

Time slowed to a crawl as we all but waded our way through, and more than once I wondered if Fishlegs had lost his way and led us straight into the center of the field. A more rational part of my mind pointed out that he wasn't stupid and knew how to walk in a straight line, but that didn't keep the anxiety from building up. None of us had dressed appropriately for this weatherâ€|"what ifâ€|?

"Here we are!" Fishlegs announced, cutting off my worrying with the most beautiful three words I'd ever heard. I had to squint just to see him, but there were definitely dark, sturdy shapes just past him.

"Thank gods," I breathed. Any longer out there, and we'd have been icicles. Ruffnut and Tuffnut surged ahead, shoving each other around and squabbling about who was going to get there first. The rest of us wasted no time in sprinting after them.

The change in scenery was a little jarring. While the forest didn't block out all of the snow, it did give us enough visibility to see quite a few meters ahead and protected us against the biting wind.

The pines were bowing with snow, threatening to spill over at any minute. But we were out of the storm for the time being, and that was all that mattered.

"So I guess we just, like, start climbing?" Snotlout asked, rubbing his bare arms and peering up at the slightly-visible trees ahead.

I nodded once. "Yup. Let's go!" And up I went.

"_Auugh_," Both Ruffnut and Tuffnut groaned. Fighting back an aggravated sigh, I skidded back down, snatched Ruffnut's arm in my grip, and then yanked her up until she caught her footing and followed along with a dignified grumble.

"We totally could've had a break," Ruffnut complained.

"We totally should've had a break." Tuffnut piped in.

"Yeah, and we could _totally_ get in more trouble!" Snotlout lost his temper at them. I gave him a dirty look; Ruffnut and Tuffnut were just tired, and complaining was sort of their thing. He huffed and focused more and getting up the hill, which was as much of an apology as anyone was going to get from him.

The rest of the ascent was spent without speaking, leaving us to listen to the storm howl overhead. The trees were twitching like spasmodic ghosts underneath the wind's assault, throwing huge clumps of snow down on us. The snow was also thick enough to slow us down, but slick enough to guarantee that each step was a measured one. Fishlegs found that out the hard way, and would have slid all the way to the bottom if he hadn't latched onto a nearby trunk in time.

Eventually, thank Odin, the crest came into view. I picked up the pace, sprinting up the hill with energy I thought I'd expended. Once we got to it, we could get our bearings and get back home! Maybe even before anyone noticed!

I slammed my hand on the solid, flat ground, pulling myself up with a massive grin.

Then nearly fell to my knees.

The area in front of us was unfamiliar, barren. The terrain didn't match up with what I'd had planned in my head; the vast, forest wilderness just kept on _going_, as if Berk had never been settled and had always been a dream. Pines older than entire sections of the village held rigid to the earth, covering the entire expanse of land before us in a wash of green, white, and umber.

"What's wrong?" Ruffnut called from behind. "Why'd you just stop?" She lost her voice as she, too, saw what I did. One by one the others finished their arduous climbs, only to find that it had been all for nothing.

It had happened _again_. _I'd led us into something stupid, something dangerous, again. "No. _No! _Son of troll-eating, dragon-conspiring mongrel!" I cursed, rounding on a nearby tree and smashing my fist into it. It did nothing but send searing pain through my knuckles and forearm, but I still sent another heavy jab into the near-black trunk

before stalking away from it.

"Now what?" Ruffnut panted. I faced my friends, hands fists at my side. All of them were exhausted, hunched over or sitting on the ground. Fishlegs was the only one who'd strayed from the group, standing on the edge of the flat we were on and staring down the other side at something.

My glare softened. Hanging my head, I confessed, "I don't know."

"I do."

Fishlegs tried to hide a sheepish grin, rubbing his neck and looking away. Then he leaned towards the edge, pointed at something directly below it.

I stepped over to look down, much more wary of the loose snow than I had been before. Then I blinked, not quite believing what was right in front of me.

It was a cave. Not quite as glamorous as a house, but in this blizzard, it was a godsend.

"Fishlegs! I love you!" Snotlout squealed in relief, crushing the bookworm with a hug. He stopped not even a second later, clearing his throat and crossing his arms. "I mean, uh, good job."

Despite everything, I couldn't hold back a laugh. We would definitely get in trouble—that was for sure. We had shelter, though, and that was all that mattered. We could find a way back once the storm passed over.

Everything was going to be alright.

* * *

><p>The cave wasn't much warmer than outside, but without the chilling wind and soaking snow, it felt like we'd walked into a house with a cozy fire and an aroma of stew in the air. The ground was completely coated, and any twigs we found were soaked and flimsy. We'd have to wait it out without a campfire—something that went without much complaint, seeing as we were lucky enough to find a cave in the first place.<p>

As we sat in a circle mulling over how much grounded-er we were, my earlier resolve to make this Snoggletog a good one returned full-force. So what if we got stuck in a cave in a snowstorm? This was the most cheerful and amazing holiday of the year, and here we were moaning about how much we were going to be punished?

"Why don't we sing some Snoggletog songs?" I asked with a hopeful smile. At the less than excited answers I received, I held out my arms and said, "Come on, guys! We should do _something!_"

Tuffnut hummed, pulling his knees closer to his chest and looking out the mouth of the cave. "Yeah, looks like we're staying here for awhile."

"We could go exploring?" Ruffnut suggested.

Snotlout didn't look very thrilled at the idea. "Without fire? We'd just get lost," he rebutted as he stared down the passage. It was very large, taking a sharp turn into darkness several meters into the hillside. How a cave this big had formed was unexplainable by me, giving it a sort of mysterious atmosphere.

Already bored with just sitting around, Ruffnut's plan became more and more appealing by the second. "I don't know," I said, "it looks pretty straightforward to me." I pushed myself to my feet, running my hand across the wall as I went along. It was smooth almost to the point that it was soft to the touch. Blinking, I rubbed my palm back and forth. "Woah, this is really weird."

Fishlegs reached out and tested it out for himself. His eyebrows creased. "But that makes no sense. No cave would have walls like this. At least, not a naturally-formed cave."

"Uh, what?" Ruffnut asked, a touch of concern in her voice.

"I'm saying that something must have made this," Fishlegs explained. He paused, and then squeaked, "So maybe we should leave?"

I shook my head wildly. "No way! We'd freeze!" Following the tunnel along, I said, "All we have to do is check the end of this to make sure it's empty. I seriously doubt something big enough to make this could live on Berk without anyone noticing."

"Astrid, I don't think that's a good idea!" Fishlegs whined, following me regardless.

Drawing a small dagger from his belt, Snotlout rushed over and stopped me. "Especially without any weapons! _I'll _go first." I started to fight back, a remark about how perfectly capable of defending myself I was on the tip of my tongue. My hand gripped the empty space my precious axe used to reside, reminding me again how little I had at my disposal. With a prideful, grudging nod, Snotlout ventured further in, holding his dagger out like a sword.

"Hey, wait for us!" Tuffnut shouted, scrambling over with Ruffnut in tow.

The smooth quality of the walls persisted even to the turn, something that Fishlegs stated was "proof that the weather hadn't done anything" to the cave. We all hesitated at the turn, but not for a reason that any of us had expected.

The cave had gotten warmer. What had at first been brushed off as the shelter from the storm was in fact something else, something deep within that was heating up the entire area. Not a single sound came from within the abyss, not even of the scraping of claws on the gravel or the shifting of pebbles across the stone floor. For all we knew, there was nothing back there.

Still, without a single weapon, trifling with fate seemed like a _really _bad idea. Had we been well-armed, I wouldn't have even considered stopping, enthralled by the adventure. But if I had learned anything in the past months, it was that there was a massive difference between a brave decision and a stupid decision.

Then again, it wasn't like we could just go back outside. The storm

had strengthened as we took refuge, and going out in it would only result in us wearing ourselves out and possible getting even more lost.

"We should stay at the front of the cave," I decided, breaking the hush that had befallen us after we'd realized that something could be deeper inside. "That way we still stay warm, but we can get out quickly if we need to." I faced the others, my back to the passage, and glanced outside the cave at the white flurry. "We'll just have toâ€"what are you guys looking atâ€"?"

None of them were even paying attention to me. All of their eyes were deadlocked directly on something near the ceiling of the cave, their faces pale and bodies frozen.

"For the love of Odin," I swore, leaning into a fighting stance even as I whipped around. Seriously, couldn't we get a break? Like, _ever?_

Snotlout was the first thing I saw, crouched with one hand tightened around his dagger and the other a fist held out at his side.

Directly in front of him was a dragon.

It was enormous, its frame so gargantuan that it was forced to lean down in the cave. Its body was low to the ground and long, reaching far past our visibility in the cave. It looked like its mouth was so big that it merged directly into its stomach.

It shifted, its forearm-long claws clicking on the floor and spines bursting from its gray scales brushing against the ceiling. Its long nose took deep whiffs, strong enough to draw my hair towards it. For a moment it seemed disorientated, its ashen irises rolling back and forth.

I wracked my brain for a name, a statistic, a fact! I had studied the Book of Dragons for weeks on end, and yet this thing looked like nothing I'd ever seen!

"B-B-Burrowpine," Fishlegs gasped, the unfamiliar name only deepening the stones in my gut.

The Burrowpine regarded Snotlout's quivering weapon with half-lidded eyes, its pupils clouded and ghostly. With a single blast of hot air from its nostrils, it had knocked him to the ground and sent me stumbling back, my chest stinging both from the impact and the heat.

"_Run!_" I shouted, grabbing Snotlout and almost dragging him until he managed to get his feet underneath him. I let go and sprinted as fast as my fatigued body would allow, my racing heart and the pounding of boots on the cave's floor the only sounds that I could make out in the hysteria. I flew past the cave mouth without hesitation, spinning around in search of the others.

Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Fishlegs had all been ahead, but they were standing just off to the side of the cave to wait for us! "Go!" I all but shrieked at them, waving my arm in a blur.

The ground underfoot jolted violently and shot up in spikes, forcing me to nearly jump into Snotlout. The unnatural formations raced right at the others and past them, shooting up like trees and cutting them off! The rubble crumbled and fell, and in a new hole beneath them the Burrowpine emerged, its spines acting as perfect camouflage against its own creation. It narrowed its eyes at them, a low growl rumbling from deep in its throat.

Fishlegs reacted the fastest, snatching up a stone that had rolled close to him and hurling it at the beast's eyes. It didn't even flinch, but it was enough to give it pause. Ruffnut and Tuffnut scooped up everything they could, flinging rocks, branches, and clumps of snow in the dragon's general direction as they escaped.

The Burrowpine huffed, standing right where it was even when the three finally got over to Snotlout and me. The storm had picked up enough that the short distance between us was barely visible. It just looked like a big, pointy bush, really. A big, pointy bush that was just _standing there._

"Why isn't it doing anything?" I whispered to Fishlegs, who was too out of breath to do anything but shake his head and shrug.

The dragon turned with slow, deliberate movements, bringing its slender tail closest to us. My eyes widened at the sight of the monster's back. Its wings were torn clean off! It had little stubs of muscle and wrinkled scales, but that was it! A Viking must have gotten to it at one point in its lifespan. Why wasn't it attacking us on sight, then?

The dragon looked over its shoulder and grunted, nodding its head deeper into the icy terrain.

â€|what the hellâ€|?

"Fishlegs? Explain?" Snotlout growled, holding his fists out in front of him.

The blonde shook his head, blue eyes wide. "Dragons always go for the kill," he mumbled. "It had us. But it looks like it wants to lead us somewhere?"

"I bet it's a trap," I said, my eyes turning to slits. That was the only explanation. Dragons hated Vikings. Vikings hated dragons. There was no way one would help us, especially after we had entered its home.

Giving what sounded almost like an exasperated sigh, the Burrowpine tilted forward and sunk into the ground as if it were water. I braced myself, preparing to jump out of the way of rock spires at any second.

The trees behind us exploded in a downpour of snow, bark, and stone. We had no choice but to flee in the opposite direction, but even then, it didn't stop! Spikes sprung forth from the ground right at the heels of our slowest runner, and every time I looked over my shoulder, a forest of them had sprouted from the ground!

"Keep going!" I gasped, my throat raw from the cold and exertion. We

were running downhill into the snow, and I feared that at any moment the damn thing would just drive us off a cliff. It was impossible to see where we were going!

My fears were neither confirmed nor disproven when the ground evened out and gave way to a smaller forest. The snow became thicker and more difficult to run through, even with the buzz of adrenaline rushing through my veins. My heart all but dropped in horror, and I clenched my eyes shut, waiting for the onslaught of agony as I was gored to death.

Mom, Dad, I'm sorry.

Nothing happened.

I had to force myself to peek over my shoulder, breathing out a sigh of relief I didn't know I'd built up when I confirmed that the others were okay. Completely spent and terrified, but okay. The trail of pine-sized spikes had stopped just at the edge of the younger forest we had entered.

Fishlegs stared at the protrusions and let out a humorless chuckle. "We must have left its territory," he said.

I bent over with my palms to my knees, shivering as my sweat froze right onto my skin. "And now we're out here, in the middle of nowhere," I wheezed. Lifting my head up, I said, "Guys, I am _so _sorry. Iâ€" "

"Aw, cut the crap," Ruffnut said, waving a hand at me. "It's not your fault a super-huge dragon threw a temper tantrum at us." She helped me straighten out, drawing a small smile to my face.

Snotlout strained against the storm, stretching his neck to get the best view he could. "Yeah," he added, "and it's not like we _weren't_ going to go this way."

Tuffnut strolled over on stiff legs. "Eh, I've seen scarier, anyways," he said, adjusting his helmet and wiping some snow off his vest. "Too bad I didn't get a scar or something. Even a burn would've been nice!"

"I don't think we should just, like, _mingle_," Fishlegs whimpered, still keeping a watchful eye on where the dragon had been last.

Nodding, I agreed, "Yeah, we need to get out of here. Maybe if we just head this way?"

I took a few steps towards the direction I was about 45% sure Berk was in.

Stone pillars erupted in front of me.

I yelped in shock, actually falling backwards this time. The ground vibrated and a distant _crack! _echoed through the trees. Several meters in the direction we'd originally been running, a cluster of rocks identical to the ones in front of me had burst from the ground.

"Astrid!" Snotlout and Ruffnut yelled. They both ran over to help me to my feet (despite me already being halfway up), nearly throwing me back upright.

"I'm alright," I groaned, rubbing my lower back. "Damn dragon."

We waited for the coward to come up to greet us. The forest remained empty save for us.

"Why'd it do that?" Tuffnut said, pointing down at the rocks further into the forest.

Ruffnut snorted. "I don't know, why are you so stupid?"

"The better question is, why aren't you running away?" Her brother cried, leaping into the air and tackling her right to the ground. I would have rolled my eyes if I wasn't so winded.

"Uh, guys?" Fishlegs held a hand out to the wrestling duo, thought better of it, and then made his way over to Snotlout and me. He pressed his hands together, biting his lower lip, and said, "I think we should follow the pillars."

"_What?!_" Snotlout and I gasped. Was he _insane?_

Straightening his posture, Fishlegs explained, "That dragon wants us out of its territory. Clearly we're still in it, and it's just _tolerating _us. If we stay any longer, it's going to stop being so nice and just attack us."

"Since when are dragons _nice?_" Snotlout said, raising his arms into the air. "They see us, they try to kill us!"

"And it might just be taking us further from Berk," I added on, trying to take a more reasonable approach.

Fishlegs shook his head. "Did you see how old that thing was? Burrowpines are supposed to be green and purple. That dragon was grayer than what's left of my dad's hair. It's probably too old to fight us, so it's afraid. And the _last _thing you want on your hands is a scared dragon!" He warned, his eyes widening.

I crossed my arms, eyebrows scrunching together. "Are you sure?"

Fishlegs nodded. "Definitely."

Every instinct I had screamed that this was a bad idea. Trusting a dragonâ€”seriously? Even so, telling the one person that actually fully _understood _the entire situation that he was wrong was an elementary mistake. Fishlegs was the only one who could even put a name to the dragon; he probably knew how to get away from it without provoking it. "Okay. I trust you."

"Ugh, this is a _horrible _idea," Snotlout moaned, running a hand over his face. He looked just about ready to start an argument and, thank Odin, decided that we had better things to do. Still, he held onto his pride by shouting, "You better be right about this!" and pointing a finger at the nervous teen's face.

"_Alright_," I sighed, knocking his hand down. "Let's just get out of here."

We started towards the blurred, snow-masked shapes in the distance, moving at a much slower pace due to the weather being more severe in the smaller forest. The battle-locked twins noticed us going past them right away and floundered to catch up, still trying to land a last hit or two on each other. It was a welcome distraction from the sinking, venomous feeling that we were being led to our deaths.

Once we were close enough to the stone trees to reach out and touch them, another group rushed from the earth on the horizon. I looked over at Fishlegs, who was just as confused as I was, and sighed when he gave a helpless shrug and continued on to the new ones.

"This _is _a horrible idea," I muttered to myself, checking over my shoulder for any more signs of the dragon.

Thrice more the same incident happened. We would come upon the pillars, and right on cue, more would come up. They were taking us on a curved path, drawing us out of the forest as it got thinner and less steep. The moon was sinking below the ocean, taking its light with it and turning the storm into a lethal mask.

With each pillar exploding in a mist of snow, the night seemed to grow more stagnant and heavy. Idle chatter quieted, swallowed by the wind and scraping sleet. The snow level, previously just past our ankles, was pulling itself back up to its former height, which was really just _unnecessary._ The ten-minute walks between posts evolved into twenty, and then thirty. Even the trees began to give up, becoming more sparse and scrawny. The lack of cover only served to make me more nervous.

I'd never felt more vulnerable.

When we reached the third extrusion, it was the only visible object in sight. The world had become nothing but deathly, freezing white, broken only by a creature that could have just been toying with us for fun. I was too exhausted to do anything but hunch over and scan the horizon, squinting against the wind.

So far away, a puff of white fog distorted from the ground, brilliant against the blackness behind it. I couldn't make out the stone, only some bits of tan against the blanched landscape. Everything was numb and my throat was scorched and stung with each break. The knowledge that we would not be able to do another set of three again weighed heavily on my shoulders.

Just one more, I thought. Giving the others an exhausted wave, I drew us further into our own demise. Nobody complained or spoke. I had to check over my shoulder every few minutes just to make sure I was being followed.

It took much longer than the last trail. I had stopped tracking time, as it only left me dreading how lengthy the next path would be. With arms coiling at my sides and feet sinking through the thick snow, I never let my gaze fall from that tiny bit of something against the nothingness. I refused to let it win and slip away, as a fish squirms out of the grasp of a net.

We did it. I almost reached the ground once we made it, unable to bear the sight of another distant beacon. Leaning against the small cliff beside us and straining my bloodshot eyes, I waited for the inevitable. It was stupid to have done this, I realized. How dull did we have to be to follow a _dragon?_

My answer came as a faded, golden light in the darkness.

That couldn't be right. Writing it off as a trick of the mind, I tried once more, only to see it come up again. This time, though, more became visible, chasing away the white and bringing with them a flood of warmth to my body. The world, hazy from overexertion, came into crisp focus as if I had just rubbed my eyes after a restful sleep. The golden light embraced the world even up here, revealing our location and _what _we were seeing.

"Home," I said. Swallowing, I raised my voice, "Guys, look!"

Nobody needed to be asked twice, sliding down Loki's Mountain to Berk without hesitation. I stopped right at the lip of it, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. On a hunch, I swiveled around to see if anything was behind me.

The Burrowpine made direct eye contact. A solid, unmoving rock despite the weather, it looked like a forgotten old statue. Then, before I could do anything, it turned around and disappeared into the blizzard.

* * *

><p>The heart of winter soon passed, taking with it the deadly storms and house-sized snowfall. The season of starvation, cold, and death went by as if it were apologetic, taking nothing with it but a few crops that were unlucky enough to be too exposed to the elements.<p>

There were no dragon raids.

Once the ice had pulled back enough, a neighboring Viking fleet docked at Berk in hopes of trade. That was normal enough—but when they began to ask for _weapons _as well, we were flabbergasted. Vikings were tough—but barbaric, even—and that is what has kept us alive against the climate and its dangers. We could improvise anything to defend ourselves, so for a _Viking _to dock on an island and ask for _weapons?_

The outsiders met up with the Chief in Town Hall, drawing with them a crowd. It was there the worn warriors recited tales of death and destruction, ravaging beasts that struck in the dead of the night. They spoke of dragons becoming more organized, more quick with their wit, and worse—but more powerful. There had been a gap in Night Fury activity that had lasted a little less than a month. As dreaded, the Night Fury had returned—but with another.

This wasn't exactly news to us, but was still unsettling to hear. It couldn't have gotten much worse than that, right?

The exact question was spoken by a confused villager, drawing a low murmur from the rest of us. I remained quiet, standing rigid between my friends as the crowd shuffled around us. One of the outsiders

wearing rags and bearing heavy scars took a long breath, eyes growing heavy and her solemn expression deepening.

"The Night Furies have started to come down to the villages," she explained, "taking out anythin' in their path, even entire groups of warriors. Somehow, they've figured out our most vital resourcesâ€"and they target them exclusively." She shook her head. "My brother found a lot of 'em tryin' to steal food in a stockpile. He had 'em cornered, even managed to ground one, and out of nowhere there was a flash of light and a boom, like Thor had taken his hammer down on them. We didn't even hear it, it was so fast.

"And when the smoke clearedâ€"a Night Fury was carrying half of him away, leaving the rest of him lying on the ground."

My heart dropped to my stomach. _Oh, gods._

"No way," Ruffnut whispered, barely audible against the exclamations of shock and bewilderment around us.

The Chief leaned forward in his seat. "What color was it?" He demanded, his fists clenching at his sides.

The woman's eyebrows scrunched up, and she glanced over at her own people for just a second. "It was hard to tell in the light. Everything looked like blood." Her expression became agitated, and she said with quite a bit of bitterness, "But I don't suppose you would _really_ _know_. Your village hasn't been touched since that boy o' yours shot that Night Fury down."

Chief Stoick stood up so fast his chair toppled over. He stalked over to the woman and stared her right in the eyes. "My son was killed by that devil," he hissed. "He was poisoned with its touch and consumed by it. If you _ever_ _want_ to trade here again, you will _not_ _blame_ him for this tragedy." When she said nothing but return his vehement glare, he barked, "Is that clear?"

"You can't say that you didn't have it comin'," she snapped. "You _had_ them. And you let them _get away_, and now _all_ _of_ the islands have suffered for it. All except _yours_," she said, gesturing all around her. "You can ignore it all you like. But that dragon is protectin' yer island. Don't you dare sit there an' tell me that this problem didn't come from Berk."

She didn't wait for the Chief to respond and turned to the rest of the outsiders. "We're leavin' this cursed placed. No good will ever come from it." She whipped around, her braid smacking against the Chief's breast plate, and stalked out like a wounded wildcat.

The crowd parted for the small group as they followed her, their shoulders slumped and their feet shuffling. They didn't look like Vikings. They looked like refugees.

The Chief waited for their leader to reach the doorway and then decreed, "Consider yer people unwelcome here. I want you off my island before sunset."

The woman stopped to meet his gaze, her eyes unreadable. "Very well. But keep this in mind, Stoick: this won't last forever. People are goin' to hear about where this came from." She smiled. "Andâ€"well,

you of all people should know how long a Viking can hold a grudge."

* * *

><p>The next few weeks passed by in a state of unease. Somehow, it was hard not to feel more and more guilty with each peaceful night. With the outsiders' threat looming over our heads, carrying on like nothing was wrong became too difficult to bear. It was hard to feel like we were safe, that we weren't about to be attacked at any moment by either dragons or other Vikings. Berk, our little village, had transformed from a safe haven to an unguarded fortress.<p>

Try as I might, I couldn't just stand idle, doing nothing in a bread shop. The village needed as many warriors now more than anything. It was unrealistic to force them to abstain from defending their home because of a punishment.

The thought occurred to me as I was counting Bergthora's coins for the seventeenth time in one day. I really did try to fight it, to keep it back, having not forgotten my conversation with the Chief. It sunk its roots deep within me, though, and it was impossible to ignore. Later on that night I snuck over to Ruffnut's house. The room Ruffnut and Tuffnut shared had a window, and by looking in I could tell they were completely conked out.

So I just let myself in.

Kicking Ruffnut's bed and throwing a stray pot over at Tuffnut, I whispered, "Guys, wake up!"

Ruffnut groaned blearily. Tuffnut somehow managed to sleep through someone throwing a clay bowl at him.

"Uhâ€|Astrid?" Ruffnut said, rubbing her eyes. "Ya got the wrong house."

I got right to the point, unwilling to dawdle and risk getting caught by their parents. "We're going to get our dragon apprenticeships back."

_That _got her attention. My friend sat up, her back rigid and eyes widening. "What?! How? Right now?" She asked, swinging her legs around too fast and falling straight out of bed.

"Uh, no," I said a bit awkwardly, "but I've figured it out. That's why I'm here to tell you guys." Glancing over at the snoring Tuffnut, I amended, "Well, tell you. You can just explain everything to him when he wakes up."

Sitting back down on her bed, Ruffnut asked, "So how are we going to convince them? I mean, what else can we do?"

I smirked.

* * *

><p>"This is a bad idea," Fishlegs said. "I mean, this is a really bad idea. Like, running around Loki's Mountain in a blizzard bad idea. And we were _beyond_ _lucky_ _everyone was still in

Town Hall when we got back."

"And we are still beyond lucky that nobody found out," Ruffnut said. "Now shut your mouth before someone overhears you."

Tuffnut made a show of looking around. "Uh, I don't see anyone hangin' out around here."

He was right, thank the gods. My plan was risky enough as it is. There was a large chance that it would fall through—but I was willing to take that risk, especially with raids and attacks on the horizon.

And there was the little detail that involved all of us skipping our jobs.

"I'm just saying," Fishlegs worried, "if this goes wrong—"

I cut him off with a simple, "It won't. All we have to do is execute it properly."

Snotlout rubbed the back of his head. "I dunno, Astrid. Are you sure about this?"

I stopped, turning to face my friends. "Guys, if you aren't confident, then I'm going to do this on my own. I can't have you being all uncertain and make us look bad. Are you with me or not?" I demanded, staring at each one individually. Fishlegs looked beyond anxious, Snotlout uncertain, and Ruffnut and Tuffnut just seemed passive about the whole thing. I had those two, at least.

"I am," Snotlout jumped to agree, holding his hands up. "It's just, like, I'm not sure about this."

"Then don't come," I said. "But I'm not stopping. It's time that we get back to doing what we were meant to do!" I smacked a fist into an open palm for emphasis. "Or are you guys alright with things how they are? All of us split apart across the entire island, the village all the more weakened without five warriors?"

"I would do anything to get off that farm," Ruffnut huffed. "Grannie's great and all, but still."

"I really do hate fishing and hunting," Fishlegs muttered with downcast eyes.

"I just want to kill things," Tuffnut said, shrugging.

A smile began to form on my lips. "So we're all in?"

They nodded. With a determined grin, I led us on our way. There was no way we were going to fail. I would make sure of it.

When we reached our destination, I turned to look at the others for one more second before knocking on the Chief's door.

It was quiet for several seconds, and I feared that maybe he wasn't home despite having checked everywhere else beforehand. Then there was a thump, the door handle turned, and—Gobber answered?

He took one look at us and ran a hand over his face. "Oh boy."

"Can we come in?" I requested.

The blacksmith gestured for us to enter. "Might as well get this over with," he all but sighed.

The Chief was standing in front of his fireplace, holding a map in his hands. He glanced over the top at us and then set it down, crossing his arms and giving us a scolding look. "Is this about what I think it is?"

"Yes. We're here to tell you we want our dragon apprenticeships back," I declared. Gobber, for whatever reason, actually grinned and leaned against the wall to enjoy the show. He almost looked impressed, even. His childhood friend wore the exact opposite expression.

Our leader strode over to us with thick, heavy steps. "Astrid, we've had this talk before, and I do not have the time to have it again," he admonished me like I was a disobedient toddler.

Holding his eyes, I squared my shoulders. "I know. But that was months ago. It's different this time."

"And how is that?"

"We've learned our lessons. We know what we did was wrong, and we've done everything we can to make up for it," I began. "Do we really deserve a lifetime punishment?"

"But that's not what's important. That warrior from the other tribe was way out of line, but she was right about one thing: we are going to get hit again. And if it's the dragons, it's going to be horrible, from what we're hearing from their stories. We'll need anyone who's able to fight out there, making sure that they know that we can still keep them off our island! And that includes us." I persuaded, hoping beyond all hope that none of my doubts were coming through.

Chief Stoick didn't respond right away. He glanced at Gobber, who shrugged nonchalantly. Then he said, "What makes you think you'll be able to do it? All five of you haven't battled in a long time. Will you be able to get back into it?"

I wanted to groan, but instead followed through on my backup plan. We had his attention—"all we had to do now was show him that we had the guts.

Grabbing my axe that had been absent from my side for too long, I raised it up to him and said, "Chief Stoick, I challenge you to a battle."

* * *

><p>Alrighty! I hope you all liked that!

**The same double-upload deal with this update will happen with the next, so it's going to take me a bit longer than usual to write. But no worries! That means you all get bombarded with scores of material

all at once again. Yay!**

Onwards to Hiccup's chapter, if you've yet to read it! Please feel free to leave any thoughts in the reviews!

Have a glorious day,

~ Rift-Raft

4. Chapter 13: Astrid

Hello, everyone!

This is the second half to the **_I Hear Him Scream
_update!**

A special thanks goes to OMAC001, Saphruikan, SuperSaiyanTreemo, and WingeRock for shooting a review both to this update and the other! You guys rock.

Enjoy!

* * *

><p>"Chief Stoick, I challenge you to a battle."<p>

The words nearly choked me, sending my heart banging against my chest and my body stiff as death. They echoed throughout the Chief's house in such a way that I was brought back to the cave of Snoggletog. It was about the same level of danger, reallyâ€"just that one would probably get me a scar or two while the other hadn't.

The Chief's didn't speak or move. His arms remained at his sides, fingers still. He seemed to size me up, and when it became clear to him that I was serious, he asserted, "Astrid, I'm not going to fight you."

I clenched my hand around my axe, holding it up high. "Are you backing down? What will it take to prove to you that we _learned our lesson?_" I all but snapped. Okay, yelling at him wasn't going to help much, _especially _if this worked. Shakily forcing myself into a calmer tone, I said, "Fight me! I'll show you what I can doâ€"what all of us can do!"

He shared a look with Gobberâ€"both of them seemed to be thinking the same thing, equally exasperatedâ€"and stepped away from his table. He widened his stance ever so slightly. We locked eyes.

I leaned back on my legs and sprung forward like a catapult, roaring a battle cry and lifting my axe behind me. I knew this was likely to end in failure, that it was a showcase of the highest disrespect, and just plain stupid. I _had _to try! We _deserved _our apprenticeships back! If this didn't work, we would be doomed to worthless, wasted lives. That was not going to happen.

Chief Stoick made no move, allowing himself into my strike range. I didn't think, only reacted, and pulled my axe through the air towards his abdomen where his chainmail was visible, where I knew a strike could only wind him. As long as I showed how strongâ€"

"Oof!"

I blinked up at the ceiling. My axe clanged to the ground. Fishlegs gave a loud gasp.

Even with the eye-opening rush of adrenaline, it took me several seconds to realize what had happened. Chief Stoick had moved faster than his large girth warranted, somehow throwing me aside with one palm and flicking my weapon out of my grasp with the other—and had done all of that as I was mid-swing.

I backrolled and lifted myself into a squared fighting position, noticing with immediate disdain that my axe had settled _behind_ Chief Stoick. He hadn't moved from his position beside the table, his sturdy stance undisturbed. I prepared to throw myself at him again, trying to keep the dissuading thoughts of failure and probabilities out of my head.

_Come on, Astrid! _I scolded myself. _Get yourself together!_

Again I threw myself into a charge, slicing through the air like a fish through water. The Chief held his false-vulnerability pose once again, but this time I was prepared. I feinted an amateur swing to his chest, ducking just as he swept his arm around to grab mine. Spinning tight on my heel, I brought my leg up to bring a full kick to his midsection—

—only to be blocked by a hand clamping around my ankle. I pinwheeled my arms and kicked with all my strength, breaking his loose hold and actually landing a hit. Then I smacked into the floor.

"I think that's enough," Chief Stoick said. He grabbed my shoulders and lifted me to my feet before I could do anything else, crossing his arms. "You've proven your inexperience. These months of being out of training have taken their toll on you."

I could actually feel my heart sink to my stomach. _No! This can't be happening again!_

"Well, whadd'ya expect?" Gobber spoke at last, still leaning against the wall and observing a hook like it was no big deal.

Chief Stoick turned to his friend once more, surprise. Gobber nodded with a slanted grin, seemingly amused by all of this. The Chief trailed his eyes behind me, to the others, and then returned his gaze to mine. "But," he sighed, "you have also shown me what I learned when I was a boy." He gave a grim smile and said, "A Viking can do anything they set their mind to. And since Gobber is willing—"

It took me a second. I glanced back at Gobber and then to the Chief, almost dazed.

Snotlout jogged to my side, quickly followed by the others. "Wait. Does this mean—?"

"Yes." Chief Stoick returned to his table and shifted through the papers on it, clasping a piece of charcoal in his mammoth fingers. "The fact that you were willing to attack me in my home and abandon

all of your jobs"especially you three, boys"says enough. But I want to make this very clear." He stopped tinkering with his things and stood tall. "This is only because of the danger that Berk is in. We need all the warriors the village can provide, and we have not been able to gain many extras without damaging the workforce. Even a single person is priceless now. That is the _only _reason I am going back on my word." His expression darkened. "Do not make me regret this decision."

I looked over at everyone with an awed, hesitant grin, and then straighten myself. "O-of course! We'll work harder than any of other recruits! I promise!"

"Me too!" Ruffnut jumped in, followed by the rest repeating her.

"Good to hear!" Gobber said as he sauntered over. "'Cause you five are goin' to get yer skins worked off." He stopped to retrieve my axe, hurling it over his shoulder. I caught it just as it spun directly above my head.

Chief Stoick set five pieces of paper onto the table, each bearing the same inscription:

This student is to begin a warrior apprenticeship immediately. They can no longer be of service to you.

-Chief Stoick the Vast

I grabbed mine before the mad rush to get to them, holding the blessed paper with reverence. So caught up in the overwhelming happiness, I barely heard the Chief tell us to go to our former mentors, barely felt myself leave, barely realized that we had all been herded out of the house.

It wasn't until we'd reached the shed between the Chief's house and the village that I finally stopped, bringing the entire group to a halt. Turning to face my friends, I said, "Guys"we did it."

"We did it!" Ruffnut repeated, throwing her arms into the air.

Snotlout flipped his hair, crossing his arms with a smirk. "_Pft. _I always knew it would work."

"As if!" Tuffnut shouted, throwing a fist to Snotlout's head. The much larger teen brought his palm up and locked hands with Tuffnut, keeping him at bay.

"Yeah, totally!"

"Totally _lying!_"

"Fight! Fight!"

"_Ruffnut!_" Fishlegs said, giving up on his fruitless attempt to stop the tussle with an eye roll.

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. We had done it. We were finally back into our proper apprenticeships, and that was all that

mattered.

* * *

><p>In hindsight, expecting to immediately go back into dragon training was a little stupid. Mostly because we didn't have dragons to battle with. The general warrior training went along fine, but dragon trainingâ€|well.<p>

Gobber had been wrestling with the problem for quite some time, coming up with ratherâ€|unique methods to train those currently in apprenticeships. It was well-known that no dragon had been on our islandâ€|except for the one we had met during Snoggletog, which I didn't dare mentionâ€|and it left my stomach roiling with anxiety. The anticipation of attack drifted overhead like a malevolent phantom lying in wait.

I sighed to myself, watching the early morning light glint off my axe and doing my best to avoid eye contact with a nearby group of children. Gods, did they not _sleep? _Why were they up so early?

My attempts to avoid them worked about as well as any other time I happened to pass them by; the runts saw me and attacked, rushing over in a whirlwind of questions and incomprehensible yelling. The warrior apprenticeships that had been returned to my friends and I had become the gossip of the day by sundown, meaning that by the time a week had passed, it was impossible to _not _be spoken to by a passerby about it.

The kids _loved _it. I would rather not have all the attention for just doing the right thing.

"Ohâ€|hey, guys," I said, inching away towards the closest shop. I didn't care how awkward it would be if I suddenly shot into it; if I stuck around, I was going to be here _forever. _I had told Ruffnut that I'd be at her house first thing in the morning, too! "I, uh, I gotta go in here to get stuff, soâ€|"

"Aw, c'mon!" A young girlâ€|"Gertrudeâ€|"squeaked. She was so young, her helmet looked like a shield she'd placed on her head. "The gwonups won't let us near the ships!"

Huh? I furrowed my brow, glancing in the general direction of the docks. It was impossible to see past all of the houses and shops in the area. Even so, it's not like they were off limits, even to young girls like Gertrude.

Unlessâ€|

No! I broke out into a sprint straight for the road that led to the docks. The gravel beneath my feet skipped away in flurry, and as the docks became closer, my head swam. I reached the top of a hill that gave me a good view of them and froze.

There were foreign ships in our bay.

My thoughts flung around at breakneck speeds, panic settling deep in chest. _It's happening_, I realized, _it's happening and I was too late where are Mom and Dad why wasn't an alarm sounded how are we going to protect the village why would they be here when the sun is

rising Ruffnut and Tuffnut and Fishlegs and Snotlout don't know yet
oh gods nobody knows!_

I unsheathed my axe, biting my lip. As a warrior apprentice, I had a duty to protect Berk. But Ruffnut and Tuffnut's family were blissfully unaware, and their help would beâ€|

No. I had to think through this rationally. Only idiots would raid a seemingly well-defended village as the sun was rising. And they certainly wouldn't be so far into our docks to trap themselves if they needed a quick escape. Not to mention the thick and desolate silence that draped over the still-sleeping village; only a few antlike figures were moving down by the docks, and they were far too slow to be in battle.

Taking a deep inhalation, I put my axe back in its proper place. I turned and ran to Ruffnut's house, my heart beating in tandem with my feet.

* * *

><p>"Do we seriously have to go all the way down
there?"

"Yes." I took us down the long way, still cautious of anyone that was still milling around. The last thing we needed was to be stopped. "Don't you want to know what they're doing here?"

"Hmmmâ€|.no." Tuffnut said. "I just wanna sleep. I need sleep. Sleep sounds nice."

"Sleep is for the weak," I shot over my shoulder. He groaned and slogged through the snow, making sure to kick some in my general direction.

Ruffnut wasn't all too eager, either. "It's probably just like last time. We'll hear about it anyways."

"Yeah, butâ€"what is _that?_" My feet glued to the spot and I gaped, unable to believe what exactly we were seeing. A group of men and women were dragging a cart through the street running perpendicular to ours, heading towards Loki's Mountain.

The last time I had seen that cart, it had contained a Night Fury. Now it held a Gronckle.

"Uhâ€|is that a dragon?" Tuffnut asked, rubbing his eyes. He blinked and said, "Now I _know _I need to sleep."

Another cart rolled into view, its passenger a Deadly Nadder tied down so fast, it couldn't open its vicious beak. And then a much larger one, completely scorched, with a small, unconscious Monstrous Nightmare limp in its bindings. The conga line continued with a cage holding an outraged Terrible Terror and a Zippleback stretched tight across something that looked like a refurbished catapult.

"I guess that explains why the kids couldn't get into the docks," I said, eyeing the rather large group of transporters surrounding each cage. There were about as many people maintaining the dragons as there had been when the Night Furies had been captured. "And nowâ€|"

My hand crept to my axe, and an easy grin slid onto my face.

Well, it was about time.

* * *

><p>The Kill Ring was like an old friend, ready to greet us with warm, outstretched arms. The smell of scorched wood and stone brought back memories I had pushed away to the back of my head, and I couldn't help to sneak a glance at Ruffnut.<p>

There was a group already standing in the center, only larger than ours by one. Snotlout snorted in condescension at the assembly of preteens and workers whom had given up their occupations to take on their part in helping the village. "Wow. Look at these guys," he said.

I eyed them, those who glanced up with sunken eyes and the few who actually looked like they genuinely wanted to be here. The Chief really hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that we were short-staffed. There were three kids whom I knew from their many runs throughout Berk; a carpenter, Hallkell, old enough to be my father; and two farmers five or so years older than myself, Freyunn and her husband Blunder.

The former three might have a chance. But the othersâ€|well, it was obvious that they had had their hands forced. Taking Hallkell out of his position was risky enough as it was, and Freyunn and Blunder had never been the most outgoing Vikings. They loved their sheep and crops, only coming into town to buy necessities and have a few drinks in Town Hall. With the few conversations I'd had with them while working in Bergthora's shop, it had been painfully clear that they both knew the barest essentials about combat.

"Looks like we won't have competition," Tuffnut observed with a wide smile, drawing me out of my analysis.

"Yeah, especially since we've already had training," his twin added.

"This is gonna be a breeze!" Snotlout said, stretching his arms high over his head.

"Don't get too full of yerselves!" Came a voice from behind. Gobber strode past, making sure to give each teen who'd spoken a good, hard wallop to the head. "Yer just as bad as the rest of 'em."

The twins and Snotlout all gave varying grunts and scowls. It was hard to accept that, as much as the words stung, he did have a point. We hadn't so much as sparred with anyone for months; we might as well have been starting off fresh. Which sucked.

"Now, today we're goin' to do things differently," Gobber started, holding one hand behind his back and pacing. "We got too big a group to all be in the Ring at once. You'll go in groups ofâ€|" he paused to count the members of the crowd, "â€|five and six. All of you head up to watch." He pointed at myself and my friends. When we didn't get up and scurry away right then and there, he shouted, "Well, don't just stand there!"

The overhang of the Kill Ring gave plenty of room to see. I leaned into the frigid railings, still damaged from that day, and craned my neck to get the best possible view. I wanted to see what the new recruits could doâ€”what my competition was. There was nothing but a stack of shields in the center of the ring, sending memories of my first time rushing forth.

Were they really still on such a basic level?

Gobber shouted something about "getting this right this time". Down went the lock to a cage.

â€|and prancing into the ring came a Gronckle, its scales showing hints of gray and its head held high. It stared down at the group that was knocking themselves over in a mad rush to get shields, not a single tooth bared. I frowned, squinting down at the stupid thing. Dragons always go for the killâ€”what was this one playing at?

Mincemeat, one of the adolescents, began smacking her shield with a mace. The others followed suit, circling around the Gronckle as it kicked itself off the ground and hovered in bumbling jolts. The dragon wavered midair, its pupils shrinking.

Then it flung its head aside and spat a molten rock directly into Meadle, the youngest! She managed to bring up her shield just in time for it to shatter, hurling jagged wood in every direction! Blunder gasped not a second later, clutching his outer thigh and skittering away, a trail of crimson in his wake. Upon seeing her husband fall, Freyunn threw caution to the wind and sprung, her weapon held behind her and a vicious scream ripping from her chest, her braid flapping out behind her. The Gronckle curved aside and swiped with its massive paw, knocking her clean off her feet.

"Ooh," Tuffnut moaned in sympathy. "That'll leave a mark."

"They kindaâ€|suckâ€|" Snotlout said. "I mean, really?" He pointed at Mincemeat as the Gronckle shot fire directly into her shield, knocking it out of her grasp and forcing her to take cover. "We're _way _above _that._"

"We _used _to be," I corrected, never taking my eyes off the dragon as it picked off each warrior one by one with ease. It was too easy to imagine ourselves in their positionâ€”too easy to see one of us injured as Blunder was.

The last Viking standing, Hallkell, fell in an explosion that sent him flying. The Gronckle snorted, shook its head, and returned to its cage with deceiving obedience.

Gobber stepped into the center of the ring, surrounded by warriors charred and still smoking. Rubbing his head, he groaned, "Ayâ€|alright, next group, let's go."

"Yeah!" Snotlout and Tuffnut cried, sharing a high-five. The two took off towards the entrance, but Snotlout pulled up short beside me. He hesitated, flashed his "winning grin", and said, "Don't worry, Astrid, I'm strong enough to take that thing down by myself. _I'll _protect you."

"Yeah?" I said, my voice low and hushed, as if telling a secret.

"Yeah," Snotlout whispered back, crossing his arms and leaning in.

Pulling all my fingers together, I jabbed my hand right where his neck met his shoulder. Snotlout let out a squeal high enough to shatter glass, hunching over and gripping his shoulder.

"Aaaow! My tender spot!" He squeaked.

Walking on without him, I admired my hand as if it were made of the finest steel. "Well, it's good to know I'll be safe from the dragon."

* * *

><p>Turns out, none of us were safe from the dragon.<p>

Of course, we lasted a lot longer than the first group. Thrice as long, even. But we were definitely not the victors when the Gronckle trotted back into its cage with its head held high. Gobber was not pleased, I could tell, but did not seem surprised in the least bit.

Hunched over in my chair in Town Hall, I spun my axe around in my hands and played the battle over in my head. Tuffnut was the first to go out, too busy yelling at Ruffnut from across the Ring. His sister shared his fate soon after because she was laughing too hard at him. Fishlegs fared a lot better than I expected, only being called out when the Gronckle unexpectedly turned on him when he was smacking his shield near it, just as it had done to Meadle. Snotlout was next, pushing me aside as payback for earlier so he could strike the dragon and only sealing his own defeat.

In his distraction, the Gronckle hit Snotlout's shield dead-center. I managed to last for some time without any of my teammates, but eventually a miscalculated roll gave the Gronckle an opening to smack me into the air, snapping its jaws at my feet. I remember believing that I was about to lose my legs, feeling nothing but the beast's sickening breath washing over me and a terrible spike of fear forcing time to a crawl.

Smack!

Ruffnut sat down with a smirk. I tried to keep my heart from beating itself dead. "You daydreamin' or something?"

"No," I said with a short glare. "I justâ€¦ugh." Throwing my arms into the air, I ground out, "We're so far behind!"

Ruffnut glanced outside. "It's only noon."

"No! I mean with dragon training." Ruffnut ooh'ed and nodded. "I just feel like we won't be ready when they eventually do come back."

Ruffnut swung her legs up on the table, balancing her chair on its two back legs. "Eh, I wouldn't worry about it. We're loads better

than the other team. And we _are _out of practice. I mean, you just got out of a breadmaking apprenticeship, for Thor's sake! Of course you'll suck."

"That's not good enough." I shot up from my chair, sending it toppling over. "We need to be prepared. Let's go practice in the Ring some more."

"_Ugh_." Ruffnut held her head back, precariously close to falling over. "But we just got our asses kicked by that Gronckle."

I kicked the chair leg, knocking my friend to the ground. "Exactly! So we need to train harder so that we _don't _get our asses kicked. Besides, you're already up," I added when she rose to her feet and put her helmet back on.

"But my foodâ€"!"

"You can eat later!" I said, grabbing her wrist and dragging her away. "Practice! Let's go!"

Ruffnut moaned. Sure, she had a pointâ€"but the faster we advanced, the faster we would become warriors!

And there was _no way _I was going to let us get surpassed by the others!

* * *

><p>I raised my arm up and knocked the punch aside, leaning down into a low crouch. With a swift hook I had my sparring opponent flailing, and all it took was a solid jab with my elbow to send them to the ground.<p>

"Astrid, six. Earwaxâ€"zero," Gobber sighed, rubbing his head. The fight had lasted maybe a minute, and to be honest, I was getting bored. Earwax was two years younger than me; he just wasn't on my level, nor did he have the experience or ambition. He had yet to grow out of his skinny frame and high-pitched voiceâ€"or his immaturity, I observed with a raised eyebrow, as he got up and stormed off while spitting out a string of curses.

"Oi! Knock that off!" Gobber smacked him and took him by his shoulders, forcing him to face us. "Take it like a true warrior and learn from your mistakes. Someone explain to him what he did wrong."

"He made his punch super obvious," Tuffnut piped up from his spot near the wall of the Ring. "And once Astrid blocked it he didn't do anything."

"He could've used his momentum to jump out of the way before Astrid elbowed him," Fishlegs added.

Earwax turned bright red. "Yeahâ€"wellâ€"!"

"Calm down, Earwax. Maybe next time," Hallkell grunted.

The ego-bruised boy crossed his arm. "Easy for you to say. _You _beat Astrid."

I chose to leave out that Hallkell and I had been evenly tied. He had his massive weight and height, and I had the know-how to use it to my advantage. Still, he was a worthy opponent when he actually tried.

The problem wasâ€¦Hallkell was the _only_ one in his six-person group who had been consistent with his training. The three kids were both too small and too sheltered to really surpass anyone in my group of friends. They hadn't even been allowed to participate in cleanup during dragon raids; all they did was run weapons back and forth, and if the enemies closed in too much, they were sent inside. Freyunn was marginally better than Blunder, but even Fishlegs, arguably the most pacifistic person in the entire arena, could knock both of them down in a battle.

"Welp, looks like it's my turn to kick ass!" Snotlout announced, clapping his hands together. He looked over at Ruffnut and myself and said, "Ladies, enjoy the show."

I rewarded him with an unimpressed glare. Ruffnut pretended to barf.

We were going in turns for each group, and Freyunn stepped out to meet the Chief's nephew. She was intercepted by little Meadle running ahead of her and waving her hand wildly. "Can I go next?!" She asked enthusiastically, grinning wide enough to show her missing teeth and jumping up and down. Gobber scrutinized the squat girl, her red hair tied up in frizzy braids and her cheeks still chubby. Then he waved her into the center.

Snotlout grimaced, disappointed, and glanced over at our mentor. "But Gobberâ€¦"

"Ready, _go!_"

Meadle ran right at Snotlout and went into a clumsy spin, aiming to kick Snotlout in his gut. He stepped backwards, arms held up in a loose defense, and dodged another attempt at him. Easily half of his height, the girl kept going, giving a frustrated growl when Snotlout again took a wide step aside. She held her arm back as far as she could and went into a wild swing, pushing all of her weight into it and eyes narrowed.

Snotlout leaned out of her reach and poked her shoulder in the direction she had thrown herself, sending her tumbling to the ground.

"Snotlout, one. Meadle, zero."

"I think I'm done here," Snotlout said, his eyes flat and lips pressed together. Meadle looked up at Gobber with wide, hurt eyes, and slumped over when he nodded and motioned with his hook for them to return to the sidelines.

When Meadle reached her spot, Mincemeat leaned down to her level and gave her a hug. "You did great," she whispered.

The girl crossed her arms and stepped out of the hug. "I just need to get better," she growled.

"And maybe get a little taller?" Ruffnut whispered in my ear. I shushed her, casting a glance at Meadle. She was doing her best, which was scores more than a few of the others in her group. She just didn't have the stature to go with it.

Gobber stepped in front of us, his hook on his chin and eyebrows scrunched together. "Alright, trainees. We're goin' to have to change a few things. You six," he pointed at the others, "are too far behind the others to be in the same class. The only one of you who beat any of these five was Hallkell. We're goin' to have separate trainin' so ya don't fall behind, and so they don't have to wait," he pointed at our group.

"What?!" Earwax and Meadle cried. Mincemeat breathed a sigh of relief, holding her sides.

"That's final!" Gobber said. "Your group meets tomorrow at noon. The rest of you at dawn."

"What?!" Ruffnut and Tuffnut gasped, eyes wide and mouths gaping.

Shuddering, Ruffnut said, "We have to get upâ€|_early?_"

Gobber laughed, heading over to the entrance. "Hey, _you _asked for this. See you tomorrow!" And with a final wave he was out the door.

The nine of us all stood there. I would be lying if I said I wasn't relievedâ€|especially since that narrowed down the choices of who would win the tournament to kill the Monstrous Nightmare.

Meadle and Earwax both wore unabashed scowls, doing their absolute best to make it as obvious as possible. Freyunn was suddenly interested in the position of the sun, while her husband seemed to have found something mysterious in the stone wall of the Ring. Most of us were following their "find something to look at" strategy, really.

It soon became unbearable, and Fishlegs said, "Soâ€|uh, good effort, guys?"

Nobody spoke.

"Wellâ€|I guess we shouldâ€|leave?" Fishlegs glanced over at the five of us, his eyes begging for help.

"_Dinner!_" Ruffnut exploded. Without any other explanation she was sprinting out the door, her twin on her heels. I glanced over at the downgraded trainees. Gods, were those looks icy.

"Uh, time to go!" I said uselessly, throwing a triumphant fist into the air. There was a pause where nobody moved or said anything.

Needless to say, I _ran _before it got any worse.

* * *

><p>The mug slammed down on the table, its contents launching out onto the grimy wood. I tried (and failed) to keep my food safe from the onslaught of ale.<p>

"You are _so _cool, Snotlout," Fishlegs grumbled, unable to rip his eyes off his soggy meal.

"I know!" Snotlout preened, stroking his hair back. "'Specially 'cause Iâ€|I don't knowâ€|get to go on a mission with Uncle Stoick!" Then he slammed down a second mug on the table, effectively soaking everything in our immediate vicinity and ruining what had once been a casual lunch.

Ruffnut was passed out on the table from having extra practice in the Ring with me, sleeping through being soaked _twice_, but Tuffnut filled in for her by screeching twice as loud as usual. "WHAT?!" His volume was explosive enough to silence most other conversations in Town Hall. "_UNFAIR! _HOW?!"

I wiped my face dry, wrinkling my nose at the taste of old, dry alcohol. "What kind of mission?" I asked as stones settled deep into my chest. I mean, _Snotlout _going on a mission? I wouldn't say that I was _much _better than him in trainingâ€|but I still was. Why _him_?

"Ooooh, is that some _jel-ou-sy_, Astrid?"

I flipped my hair away from my eyes. "No," I said, "just want to know how long I get to not have you around."

Tuffnut snickered and Snotlout's smug look fell just a bit. He placed his hands on his hips and said, "Oh, don't you worry your pretty littleâ€|I won't be gone for too long, Miss Jealousy!"

"Damn," Fishlegs complained, slumping over. Snotlout took his first mug and dumped all of what was left onto the bookworm's plate. "Whaâ€|_hey!_"

"So, what kind of mission are you going on again?" I repeated, keeping a much stronger handle on my tone.

Snotlout smirked. "_Welllll_," he drawled, "you know the ships from that neighboring clan that have been docked here for a while?"

"Yes?" Fishlegs, Tuffnut, and I said. Ruffnut snored.

"And you know how they came here asking to trade for _everything_ and how they're really super-weak right now?"

"Yes?"

"And you know how they've been talking about how bad the dragon raids are?"

"_Yes?!_"

Snotlout raised his arms into the air. "Well, I get to go with Uncle Stoick back to the other islands to trade!"

Oh. That was it? And here I was, actually letting this get to meâ€|

Snotlout lowered his arms. "Well, don't be _too _mad you can't come!"

"Uh, you're just trading?" Tuffnut said. "What's the big deal?"

Snotlout leaned forward, palms flattened against the table. "The _big deal _is that Chief Stoick is training me to be Chief someday. What are _you _doing?"

"Hey!" I interjected before things got ugly. Snotlout still looked self-righteous and Tuffnut visibly annoyed, but they dropped it. Thank gods.

Fishlegs, still looking at his soaked food, asked in a deadened voice, "So, when are you guys leaving?" He pushed away the plate in defeat and then said, "And what are we trading for? I mean, it's not like we're in vital _need _of anything."

Snotlout looked around for eavesdroppers and sat down. "Basicallyâ€|well, Uncle Stoick says that we're probably not really going to get any gain from this, and that it's mostly to teach me about dumb things like generosity and helping other Vikings fight the common enemy and stuff, even though they're all _jerks _to us." He leaned in close, lowering his voice. "But he said that we're basically just going to give our stuff away. Apparently the other clans don't have _anything _to trade with us."

Fishlegs, Tuffnut, and I shared a glance. They hadâ€|nothing?

Gods, how bad _were _these raids?

"Yeah! I know!" Snotlout said. "Uncle Stoick also says that because we're bailing them out, we could call in a You-Owe-Me and they'd be honor-bound to do it."

"Ah, blackmail," Tuffnut said dreamily.

I leaned back in my chair. "This is good! This means that we're getting a good reputation again."

"Oh! Uh, there's that too! Good thinking, Astrid!" Snotlout rushed. A faint blush colored his cheeks and he looked away. "So, what do you guys think?"

Our conversation went on as patrons passed in and out of Town Hall. With each sentence, I felt more and more relieved. In fact, it was a wonder why we hadn't been doing this in the first place! Help fight the dragons in any way we can _and _give aid to Vikings in need? It was a foolproof plan.

Finally, after months of an awful reputation, we were making a comeback.

* * *

><p>The ships left at daybreak the next day. The entire village

gathered at the docks to see them off, cheering and shouting to bring back a few dead dragon trophies. The twins, Fishlegs, and I stood on the edge of an overhang that allowed us to see the decks of all of the ships, but it was impossible to find Snotlout among all of the masses.<p>

It wasn't until the outsiders had sailed out of our waters and our ships followed that we finally saw them in the lead ship. Chief Stoick was standing at the bow with Snotlout and seemed to be speaking with him about something. He clapped him on the shoulder and then walked over to Gobber. Snotlout turned back to face the dock.

"_YEAH SNOTLOUT!_" Tuffnut screamed, throwing his hands around in a blur. Snotlout began jumping up and down and waving in a similar fashion. He looked like a little dot on the ship, anything he was saying drowned out by the distance.

We watched them until the sails merged with the clouds.

* * *

><p>Dinner was interrupted by a frantic pounding on the door. I jumped out of my chair, axe ready. My mother bolted up as well, but only made her way over to the door when the knocking did not cease. Dad continued eating.<p>

Mom opened the door, letting in all of the cold nighttime air, and gasped. "Snotlout! Butâ€|"

"We got back earlier than expectedâ€"yeah totally crazyâ€"so is Astrid home?"

I pushed myself into the doorway, my surprise deepening upon seeing that Snotlout had Fishlegs, Ruffnut, and Tuffnut in tow. All three of them looked as confused as I felt. Snotlout, thoughâ€|he was ghastly pale, eyes glazed and fists clenched bone-white.

"Uh, can I eat later?" I asked, widening my eyes at Mom and tipping my head towards them.

My mother bit her lip, eyebrows scrunching together. "â€|Alright. But don't be out late."

We walked in silence until we heard the _clunk _of the door shutting. I rounded on Snotlout. "What happened?"

He looked around, bringing my attention to all of the open windows in nearby houses. "Let's get somewhere we can't be overheard."

Snotlout took the lead, taking us towards the roads closest to the woods before eventually stopping in a relatively abandoned area: a small field with a pine tree in the center. He threw his back up to it and slid down, gazing up at the leaves before picking a dying branch that had fallen off. Near the root of the branch, the pine needles looked alive and well, but as the branch thinned out, they became frail and brittle.

We sat down in front of him. "So?" I said, the word heavy with apprehension.

Snotlout stared down at the half-dead branch. "It was Hiccup."

It took him a moment, but he elaborated, "It was awesome at first. Being in a new village, learning how to be a Chief, showing off, you know? I even had a couple babes comin' after me. I was the most perfect guy to them." He tried to smile, but it was too false, too strained. "But the night we get thereâ€¦everything is fine one second, and the nextâ€¦" Snotlout shuddered, gripping the branch hard enough to shake a few leaves off. "These dragon raids are nothing like they used to be. We heard a Night Fury twice, and that was it. The entire edge of the village just _exploded_. All of it! The fire was taller than houses!

"The weirdest part was that it was so organized. I saw only three dragons at any time. They were all working together just to wreck thingsâ€¦they weren't even stealing food! I went to go help, but just as I was about to get close to some dragons, the Night Fury came down and it justâ€¦he justâ€¦totally _blasted_ everyone. There was so much blood, andâ€¦andâ€¦" Snotlout choked, slamming his unoccupied fist on the ground. "I tried to help but someone told me to go let the Chiefs know. As if they _didn't_. But I went anyways, and I was halfway there whenâ€¦"

Snotlout took a moment. Then he picked apart the healthy leaves on the branch as he spoke. "I saw Uncle Stoick and he kept trying to wave me off. I was getting kinda angry, and then _he_ _walked_ out of some shop like he owned the place. He kept on looking up at the sky and was really distracted, and Uncle Stoick started to sneak up on him, and he was _so close!_ But Hiccup saw him and started to do that defensive warning stuff Fishlegs always talked about only with a lot more teeth, and for some reason Uncle Stoick dropped his guard and, and Hiccup justâ€¦fell."

I hated to interrupt, but still said, "He fell?"

Snotlout nodded, running his fingers over the remaining pine needles, both healthy and dead. "Yeah. It's like Uncle Stoick killed him, but all he did was look at him. There was a Terrible Terror there, tooâ€¦it got up and started biting at his ears and hitting his face, but he wasn't moving. Uncle Stoick just looked at him with thisâ€¦_expression_. Then Hiccup got up and they fought, and Uncle Stoick almost got him right in the neck but Hiccup moved out of the way. But he was still hurt real bad and flew off." This was said with venom, the green needles being ripped away again. "But before he got away, he turned around and took one look at Uncle Stoick and passed out right there."

He paused to let that sink in. "A Nightmare caught him. He almost looked dead. And the worst partâ€¦the worst part was, when I saw that happen, I was _scared_ for him. I didn't want to watch Uncle Stoick kill him. I was terrified that traitor was going to snap his neck when he hit the ground. And when the Nightmare grabbed him and flew away, I was relieved. I was _relieved!_" With a snarl Snotlout ripped the branch in two and threw it aside. What remained of the healthy end fell to pieces, only a bare bone left behind. The dead end remained intact, its brown leaves quivering.

"Well, he is your cousin," Fishlegs tried to soothe. "I know you guys used to be a lot closer when you were kids. It must be hard to see

himâ€”"

"Shut up, Fishlegs," Snotlout snapped. He drew his knees up and rested his arms on them, eyes locked on something I couldn't see.

I clenched and unclenched my hands together. It was likely the village would hear of this sooner or later, but not like this. Not like what it actually was: a war story.

That damned traitorâ€”that awful _thing _that had once been Hiccup just couldn't stop, could he?

Ruffnut shifted to face Fishlegs. "Do you know why he fainted, _twice?_ That's totally weird for a dragon."

Fishlegs hummed, holding a finger to his chin. "It could be a number of things. Dehydration, malnutrition, some sort of serious injury, being crushed or being choked by somethingâ€”but it was triggered by the Chief. You said it only happened when he looked directly at him?" Snotlout nodded once. "I thinkâ€”I think it may have been a fear response, the first time. Hiccup's passed out like that before, especially when we used to hang out as kids and something'd scare him. Maybe seeing his dad there with a weapon and clearly having the intentions to kill him frightened him enough to make him pass out. The second time I would say blood loss, especially if he was injured in his neck. Those always bleed the most."

"The _coward_," I hissed. "Can't even face someone he knows, yet has no problem killing masses? He's nothing but a weakling that can't accept what he's done."

"Is that why there haven't been any dragon raids?" Tuffnut wondered, looking up at the clear stars. "Hiccup just being a scaredy cat?"

"More or less," I said, glancing over at Snotlout. He was holding his forehead in his palm, slouched over and eyes distant. "I'm sorry, Snotlout."

Snotlout shook his head, straightening his posture and taking in a deep breath. He leveled his eyes on mine. "It's not your fault. It's not _any _of our faults."

"It's Hiccup's," I confirmed with a firm nod.

"No," Snotlout said forcefully. I flinched, and he lowered his eyes to the dead branch. "It's not Hiccup anymore."

* * *

><p>The incident was passed through Berk in the way any tragedy had, whispered in the ear and halted when someone passed by. Wherever the Chief went, silence was sure to follow. It even affected Snotlout to some extent, most notably when we hung out in crowded areas and suddenly everyone found a way to tolerate his arrogant behavior.<p>

Still, it was only a week later when another trading party went out. Once again Snotlout left with them, with significantly less enthusiasm. They did not return when expected, drawing panic from a

select few of Berk's people who were too paranoid for their own good. The ships soon returned, thankfully, bearing significantly less cargo but successful in helping other Viking clans fight the dragons. While a Night Fury had been spotted, it did not attack in such a devastating raid as the last, and apparently was much more economical with its time spent near the ground.

On and on the trading missions went. Berk began to rebuild its good name and reputation of fierce warriors. The pine-brown Night Fury, on the other hand, disappeared into the shadows that it had come from, becoming nothing but a horror passed on in stories.

* * *

><p>Ring ding ding ding!

Bergthora glanced up from the counter and smiled. "Kids pesterin' ya?"

I stood there a bit awkwardly, running my hand through my hair and suddenly regretting my impulse decision to walk in. "No, I just came by for old time's sake, I guess." I shrugged and said, "I was walking home from training and decided to stop by."

"Training? How's that going?" Bergthora asked, scooping up some coins and stooping over to put them in the chest under the counter.

I grinned. "It's great! It started out with a bunch of us all in one group, but my friends and I were already experienced enough to move on to a higher level than the other trainees. I'm not sure how that's going to work out with killing the Nightmare, but hopefully it means less competition."

Nodding in approval, my former mentor said, "That's great to hear, Astrid. I have to be honest: bread making was not your future." She chuckled. "Every day I wondered when the time would come when you would burn the shop down!" She laughed wholeheartedly.

"Heh. Yeahâ€¦," I said, my cheeks flaming. "So, uh, how's things going for you, then?"

"We're doin' well. My husband's been comin' back from those trips in one piece, which is a blessing. You wouldn't believe the stories he's been hearing!" She leaned over the counter, eyes widening. "Apparently a Night Fury has been seen flying during the day."

I blinked several times. "What?! That never happens."

"Apparently it does now!" Bergthora said. "These are strange times. My husband's heard from three different islands that their voyages have spotted a lone dragon flying about. For some reason it flies in close to the ships, but turns around just when it's close enough to attack. Or be attacked, that is."

"Did any of them follow it?" I demanded. If that Night Fury was tracked, it would lead them right to the nest!

Bergthora snorted and said, "Of course not!" My jaw went slack. She raised a brow and asked, "Have you not heard about the fleets that were sent to Helhiem's Gate?"

"No?" _But Snotlout is definitely getting his ass whooped in training for not telling me about it!_

"My husband didn't visit the clan that led the first attack, thank Thor," Bergthora said. "But that one was the worst. On one of his trips, there was talk of an entire fleet going inâ€|and only a little under half leaving."

I shrugged. "That's how it usually is, though."

Bergthora shook her head rapidly with a stern look. "No. These losses were much more severe. And the majority of the downed ships were because of one Night Fury." Her expression softened. "A brown one. Other Vikings have tried going in, but they never get far."

"So the one flying around by itself is Hiccup?" I wracked my mind for a reason why, but could come up with nothing.

"Nobody knows," Bergthora said. "It's always too far up to really see what color it is. But after all of the more recent attacks and the failed invasions, nobody wants to go near that Night Fury."

We discussed what the motives behind the odd behavior were. I personally thought that the Night Fury was scouting, trying to track down the movements of the shaky trade route between islands and determine when islands would be at their weakest. Bergthora thought that was too advanced for a dragonâ€she mentioned that many rumors throughout the island were that the "Meandering Night Fury" was a lost apparition looking for its soul. To her, it was more plausible that it was looking for a mateâ€more specifically, a female Night Fury.

I ended up leaving the shop with far too many questions than I had been prepared for. It made me glance up at the sky in worry, almost expecting to see a faint silhouette stark against the clouds. Whatever that Night Fury was doing, it certainly wasn't without good reason.

What could it possibly be trying to accomplish?

* * *

><p>"Today is about teamwork!" Gobber announced. "And it better not end up at last time! Now spread out."<p>

Everyone looked at Ruffnut. She scoffed and flipped her hair. "I got this," she said, rolling her shoulders and tramping off to the shield stand. The rest of us followed suit, distancing ourselves to cover the entire Ring. Tuffnut stood just far enough away from Ruffnut to avoid a scolding, his easygoing smile gone.

Gobber waited for us to settle in and then opened the cage holding the Zippleback, engulfing the entire arena in green smog. "You all know how to be stealthy when you have _cover_. But what about in the open? What if you're caught in a field with nowhere to go?"

The ground vibrated as the dragon, unseen, stepped out of its cage. A low moaning came from the cage's direction. I unsheathed my axe, squatting low.

Just find the blind spot, I remembered. _Hideous_ _Zippleback: sneak up quietly. It can twist its heads all the way around. Always stay behind them._

Stooping low and taking in short breaths, I began to follow the wall of the Ring. The vibrations continued, and again a moan came from somewhere in front of me, quiet and trilling. It was answered with a similar-sounding bark.

Something tapped my shoulder. I took a huge gulp of air, spinning around and raising my axe. Fishlegs ducked away just as I was about to swing it, waving his palms and cringing.

"This fog will float away soon," he hissed. "We have to take care of it before then."

"How? Get it before it starts flying?" I said, searching the fog for an indication of the Zippleback's whereabouts.

Fishlegs warily raised his spear when the vibrations stopped. "It can't fly as well as other dragons, so it won't take off without good reason. Butâ€"

We both stilled when Ruffnut shouted, "_Tuffnut, I'm fine!_" This was followed by a smack, a grunt from Tuffnut, and a loud hiss from something off to our left. The vibrations transformed to small earthquakes as the dragon hurled itself towards the source. Fishlegs and I bolted without another word.

Just in front of me, a looming shadow came into view. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were next, with the latter scrambling off the ground and the former standing with a raised weapon, eyes locked on the Zippleback's.

The dragon flared its wings wide and hissed, dispersing the gas in our immediate vicinity. One head began to snap its jaws, sparks flying. The twins were effectively cornered, but they didn't seem to care as they both readied themselves with identical grins. The Zippleback reared, teeth dripping with venom.

"_Hey!_" Fishlegs shouted, jumping up and down. The dragon paused, its heads swinging to us. "Over here!"

"_No!_" Directly across from us, Snotlout's voice came from within the fog. "Here! Get me!"

Ruffnut and Tuffnut shared a glance. "No, us! Fight us!" The two began to scream at the top of their lungs, forcing the Zippleback's heads to swing back over to them.

The Zippleback head closest to Fishlegs and me lunged towards us. The other snapped at Snotlout, who was now visible as the gas faded. Both heads were snapped back and hit each other from the recoil. They seemed to take a moment to figure out what happened and faced each other, hissing and growling.

"Now that they're arguing, we just have toâ€" I started, only to stop when the gas head of the Zippleback sprayed its twin right in its face.

There was a brief cracking noise. The entire arena seemed to collapse on itself in a roar as a wall of fire rose to the sky. I dropping into a crouch and held my shield up, gritting when the flames hit it and curled around to lick at my arms. The remaining gas still in the arena was next, everything from the waist down bursting into a mass of orange, heat, and noise. I squeezed my eyes shut, grit my teeth, and fruitlessly pressed myself further against my shield as fire erupted from all sides and leapt hungrily at my skin.

The silence that followed was joined only by the ringing of my ears and the hammering of my heart. After taking in a deep breath, I poked my head out over my shield. Snotlout was hidden behind his blackened shield. The twins had taken advantage of the corner they had backed into and pressed against it, using their shields to box themselves in. Looking to my right, Fishlegs had assumed the same position as me, his arms burnt in multiple places. I knew I looked the same.

The Zippleback looked around with wide eyes and frozen limbs. Once more the gas-breathing head turned on its other and spat at it. This time, the other lowered itself in submission.

_We have to do something now! _I thought.

I threw my shield aside and screamed, sprinting at the beast and raising the axe over my head. The Zippleback faced me with both heads, spreading its wings out as wide as it could and snarling and gruesome teeth dripping. The left swooped down with a gaping maw, gas building up in the back of its throat. I skidded aside and smacked it away with the side of my axe, stunning it enough to make it sway. There was no time to take advantage, though, as the other head went over the other at me! I had just a moment to see my reflection in its eyes before throwing myself to the ground, my hair whipping back and forth as the dragon just barely missed.

Fishlegs, finally having come to his senses, came running to my aid. He grabbed the head I had smacked and crushed it into the ground, struggling to use his body weight to keep it down. Even with him on top of it, he could still barely keep it contained as it thrashed underneath him. The damned thing was throwing its entire body into it, leaning as far away from him as it could! "I need a little help here! Woah!" He cried out as it swung its neck swung to the side, nearly knocking him off.

"Ah!" I yelped when the other head lunged at me, nearly hitting its target! Rolling away from a second strike, I once again tried to ready my axe to stun it. "Ruff! Tuff! Help him!"

"We're on it!" Tuffnut shouted.

Alright, goodâ€"we're getting it cornered and it can't move. Now Snotlout and I need toâ€"oh, _shit_!

The Zippleback's tail swept out from under me, knocking me off my feet! Somewhere off to my direct left, Snotlout shouted my name. The remaining head didn't waste a second, its teeth glinting in the sunrise.

Something similar to the sound of rotten food splattering on the round came from the direction I'd heard Snotlout. The dragon halted,

its eyes widening. For just a moment we stared at each other. Then it threw its head back and roared, its tail whipping around and smacking me again! It flung me aside, and in the rush of colors that followed I just barely made out the head that was being held down rise off the ground with Fishlegs, Ruffnut, and Tuffnut dangling from it, all of whom were struggling to keep its jaw clamped shut.

"Astrid!" Snotlout yelled again.

"I'm fine!" I said, bolting to my feet. The Zippleback was snapping at the three still hanging onto it, who were kicking at it in return. One of its wings had a gaping hole cut straight through it, crimson blood bursting out and painting the floor in its wake. Snotlout was standing directly beneath it, his sword raised to strike again and face reddened with anger.

I rushed forward just as Tuffnut leapt from one head to another, aiming to clamp that one down as well. A quick slice to its stumbling legs had the Zippleback unsteady enough for Snotlout to tackle its side, tipping it over! Leaping onto its exposed ribcage, I raised my axe high above my head

"Astrid!" Gobber intervened. "We need that dragon alive!"

I halted, limbs frozen. The unholy creature remained where it was, both of its heads being held down by the twins and Fishlegs, and its injured wing pinned by Snotlout standing atop it. With a sigh, I slowly lowered my weapon and stepped back onto the stone floor of the Ring.

Gobber approached the Zippleback and kicked at its side, waving his hand at the others. They all jumped away just out of reach. The dumb thing scrambled to its feet, favoring its injured leg, and backed away as Gobber commanded, "Get back in yer cage, you stinkin' snake!"

The dragon was more than eager to return to its rightful place, its eyes venomous as the door shut. Gobber clapped his hands as if ridding them of dirt and said, "Good job! But ya shoulda done what you just did before it lit its gas. That's the difference between a few houses needing to be rebuilt or not." He pointed at me, his voice stern. "And always remember that you do not kill these dragons. I love a good pelt as much as the next Viking, but we need them for trainin'."

"Sorry." I rubbed my arm, flinching when I hit a particularly burnt spot. "Just kinda got caught up in the moment."

"'Course," Gobber grinned. "Nothing beats the thrill of killin' a dragon." He looked up at the sky and grunted. "It's about time for the others to show up. Now scram, and be here tomorrow mornin'."

After such a violent battle, we were halfway to Berk in no time. I looked down at my burnt arms and poked gingerly at my neck and face, wincing when the familiar sting of burns leaped from my fingertips.

Tuffnut happened to see me checking over myself and groaned. "Uuugh, this is so unfair!"

"Huh?" Fishlegs raised an eyebrow. "But we beat it."

"Yeah, I know!" Tuffnut crossed his arms. "But _you guys _got cool battle scars."

I glanced down at the patches of darkened skin on my arms. They looked more like a disease than a scar. They _were _battle scars, though. "Eh. It could be cooler."

"I dunno, mine looks like fire!" Snotlout bragged, holding his arms out. Somehow he had managed to protect all but the sides of his arms, which had been burnt far more severely than Fishlegs or me. I couldn't see it, but apparently Tuffnut could, from the small fit he threw upon seeing it.

We decided to walk through the village to Town Hall for some lunch. The brisk air promised of summer soon to end. Somehow, though, the impending cold didn't seem so bad anymore.

* * *

><p>Training went on as usual. The other group began to catch up at such a slow pace that I didn't give them a second thought. We fought the Gronckle, the Zippleback, the Terror, and my favorite, the Nadder. The Nightmare remained cooped up, the only signs of its existence being the occasional roar from its cage as it tried to escape.<p>

It was like music to my ears. The training sessions with Ruffnut continued, but I always worked twice as hard, pushing myself to my limits each time. That dragon was mine.

* * *

><p>The streets were deserted.<p>

The fog was suffocating, obscuring the barely-visible sun above from any guidance. Every shop I walked past was closed, every house door locked tight. My footsteps echoed off each stone with a kind of resignation and firmness that felt more depressing than the last. A chill swept through my body and I pulled my light coat closer, fingers hovering above my axe.

I stopped at the usually-bustling center of Berk and sat down on a monument to the first settlers, our forefathers. The fog looked like an assembly of wandering ghosts aimlessly floating through the streets. I could almost make out figuresâ€"there was a Nadder, there was a little girl, there was Snotlout, there was a warrior wielding an axeâ€|

I blinked and straightened out of my hunch as Snotlout walked over. He sat down next to me with a sigh.

"â€|How is everything?" I asked after watching the imaginary figures for some time.

Snotlout gave a small grin. "It's nothing I can't handle." I lowered my eyelids at him, and he chuckled humorlessly. "Alright. My dad's at Uncle Stoick's house. It'sâ€|pretty rough."

"And you?" I pressed.

He bit his lip. "I'm fine. It's just so weird. It's like nothing ever happened, but then you just look at Uncle Stoick and you remember."

"I know. It's just likeâ€¦ghosts," I said, motioning at the fog.

We sat in silence again. Footsteps approached, and Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Fishlegs emerged together. Everyone exchanged their greetings, and that was it. It was like the fog engulfed anything we wanted to say before we said it.

The sun was too heavily masked to judge how much time had passed when Snotlout stood up. "Let's go," he mumbled, seemingly picking a direction at random and going with it.

Ruffnut walked over to me and whispered, "He okay?" I shook my head, and her face fell just a bit. "Poor jerk."

"Just don't talk about it," Fishlegs shushed from her other side. We both shot him annoyed looks, to which he said, "Well, it's just going to make things _worse._"

"You know I can hear you, right?" Snotlout called out without looking back. "I'm fine. Really." He picked up his pace, leading us off a street and into the forest.

I raised my eyebrows at our surroundings as we continued walking and glanced at the others. Of all the places to goâ€¦

The path was rugged, but in an abrupt turn, it flattened out. All of the grass was trampled, tree branches broken and thrown aside, stones kicked away. The fog seemed to take on a more sinister presence to it, swirling through the air as if blown by a violent wind.

"Well, this is spooky," Tuffnut observed. He kicked a stone that had been left in the new trail and watched it skitter out of sight. "It's like there's ghooosts!" He wiggled his fingers at us. I made a point of ignoring him, while his sister took a more direct approach and smacked him with her helmet. "Augh! Jeez, I'm just trying to lighten the mood, guys."

"Do it better," Ruffnut said.

The trail went down a swift incline, forcing any conversation to a halt as everyone tried to keep from falling onto each other. When we reached the bottom, Snotlout disappeared between a crevice formed from gigantic stone.

We emerged out into the cove, the lake rippling and impossible to see into and the fog slightly less condensed. I looked over at the gaping, smooth hole on one side and the crumbled wall on the other. Snotlout was standing a short walk away, looking down at the ground. Biting my inner cheek, I went over to see if he'd found something.

There were faint runes in the dirt, too faded from the weather to make out, but present nonetheless. The fact that they were still

there was astonishing enough.

"It's like it was just yesterday," I said, leaning down and touching one. The rune smeared, mud caking my fingers. Snotlout crouched as well, grunting in agreement and dragging his finger through a clearer one to bring it back to the present. He gave it a second glance and then stood up, starting to make his way towards the dragon-made cave. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were trying to climb into it with no avail, while Fishlegs stood off to the side and watched midway.

"You know, we never did find out how that happened," I said once I'd gotten up and caught up with him.

Fishlegs shrugged, having heard me. "They were fighting."

"Exactly!" Snotlout growled. "They were fighting, and then the next thing we knewâ€|"

Ruffnut and Tuffnut stopped their efforts to get into the cave and joined us once they noticed that we were all having a conversation. "I still remember when he tried to save me," Tuffnut said, glancing up at the top of the cove.

Laughing, Ruffnut said, "Yeah, did he think he was going to catch you or something? He just stood there!"

"That wasn't the only time," Fishlegs said. "Remember when he threw the Night Fury down? It almost had us, and he forced us to stop."

I had almost forgotten about that conversation. It was so long ago, and had felt like a grand trickery when we'd finally realized where Hiccup's allegiances lied. "I remember when that thing attacked me. I almost had it." Rubbing my eyes, I wondered, "What would have happened if I'd killed it that day?"

"He would be just as gone as he is now," Snotlout said, his voice subdued. "He'd just be in the forest running around. We would have got him eventually. And thenâ€|I guess he would have been used for dragon training."

"Or made into a pelt," Ruffnut said carelessly. It was Tuffnut's turn to hit her upside the head.

We looked all around, squinting through the fog. The cove was filled with little indicators of Hiccup's time here. The damaged walls, the trees that were burnt for some reason, the patches of coal on the ground that could only be formed by a dragonâ€|the writing. So many signs, and so little of them human.

For the longest time, I'd thought him as a survivor, someone in need of rescue. For the shortest time, he was. Now it was hitting me full-force, something Snotlout likely felt the moment he saw it happen and watched his cousin banished. The entire village was realizing this today, if they hadn't already done so. I couldn't imagine what Chief Stoick was going through at this moment.

"An entire year," Snotlout breathed. "How could this have happened?"

* * *

><p>Something was going on at the docks.<p>

I noticed it when I was heading back from some solo practice and happened to glance down towards the ships. I was situated higher than most of Berk and could easily look down most of it, and could just barely make out the figures of catapults being rolled onto the vessels.

More than a little worried, I tried to make my way down to them, but was stopped just before I got there.

"Can't you just tell me what's going on?" I demanded to the man and woman blocking my path, both aged warriors judging from their scars.

"It's just for the next trading voyage," the woman answered briskly. "Now be off."

That was a lie, and she clearly knew that I didn't believe her. I ground my teeth and said, "Are other Vikings attacking us?"

"No. Everything is fine," the man said. "Now shoo." He spun me around and pushed, forcing me to scramble to keep my balance. I sent them both a glare and changed course, heading right for the Jorgenson household. If they wouldn't tell me, then I'd just have to find out from someone else.

* * *

><p>"What do you mean you can't tell me?!"<p>

Snotlout grimaced. "I'm sorry! But Uncle Stoick said I couldn't! And I'd be totally grounded if I did!"

"Are we in danger?" I all but shouted. "I think we have a right to know! Why else would they be putting catapults on those ships? I seriously doubt we're trading them!"

"You're right! I meanâ€"uhâ€" Snotlout stammered when I leaned in close. He cleared his throat and said, "Look, they were right when they said you shouldn't worry. But you understand why I can't tell, right?" He grinned uneasily.

"_Ugh_." I grunted. "I need to go." I stalked away from the door, aiming to go right back up to my training spot and let off some steam.

"Sorry!" Snotlout shouted after me. It didn't calm me down in the least bit.

Gods, I hated secrets.

* * *

><p>"Hah! Is that all you got?!"<p>

I rolled my eyes at Tuffnut's bluff, peeking out from behind the corner of the barrier I'd camped behind. The Nadder was frustrated and injured from a swift blow to the tail via Ruffnut, and so was

moving a lot more recklessly in the Ring.

Of course, Snotlout and Tuffnut had decided that they didn't _need _stealth to get the upper hand and had begun taunting it. Apparently they thought that they could use its anger to their advantage, but all that ended up happening was the dragon pursuing their every move with no clear intentions of stopping.

Oh, and it was _pissed._

Tuffnut flew past me, Snotlout on his heels. Pounding not even a meter behind them was the Nadder, its head low and wings held out as far as it could stretch them.

"Ugh," I moaned, holding my head in my hand. The two refused to ask for help, and Gobber was content with letting them learn their lesson the hard way. The stupid dragon just chased them around and around the small maze that had been constructed, knocking down everything in its path.

Tuffnut turned on his heels and swung his arm, a throwing knife sailing at the Nadder's head. It ducked right underneath it, stomping its feet and claws gouging into the stone.

"_Shit!_" Tuffnut said. He turned around and sprinted after Snotlout, who had bolted the second the weapon missed its mark.

"Hey, make sure it gets your good side, to even out the ugly!" Ruffnut taunted, sitting on top of a wall that had yet to be pushed over.

Snotlout pushed his way out into the open center, twirled, and tried to make a decision of where to go just a moment too long. Tuffnut ran out next and failed to actually look where he was going, slamming right into his friend and pushing them both to the ground. Right on cue, the Nadder joined the party, its jaw wide open as it hurled itself towards the two downed Vikings.

I cursed under my breath and got to my feet, but I was too slow! The Nadder swung down, its jaw wide open and saliva swinging from its teeth. My heart all but stopped.

Snotlout thrust his sword right into the unsuspecting dragon's mouth. There was a horrible crack and crunch, and the beast swung its head away with an agonized screech. It spat out a chunk of mangled metal coated in blood and fled, retreated back into the maze. I stepped out into the center with just enough time to hear Fishlegs gave a startled yelp, which was followed by the recognizable sound of a hammer on dragon scales. The Nadder jumped up onto the walls, its entire cheek bloodied, and hopped away to its open cage.

Snotlout stared down at his destroyed sword with wide eyes. Tuffnut laughed.

"That was a close one!" He said, pushing himself up and dusting himself off.

"My _sword_, " Snotlout whined.

Gobber walked over and placed his hand and hook on his hips. "You can

get another one! Now what did you learn?"

"Don't stick a sword in a dragon's mouth," Snotlout grumbled.

"No! Well, yes," Gobber admitted. "The point is, don't taunt somethin' ya can't handle. _Especially _if there's only two of you! If this happened during a raid, you woulda been dinner." He walked over to the Nadder cage, where the dragon was huddled in the corner, and shut it with a flick of a switch. Placing himself by the Gronckle's cage, he shouted, "Now we're going to get this _right _this time!"

Snotlout held his head back and groaned. "But my _sword!_"

* * *

><p>A loud, agitated rapping thrust me awake, making me freeze where I lay. I held my breath, snaking my arm under my covers to where I had propped my axe up against my bed.<p>

Everything was quiet again. My eyes weren't nearly adjusted to the dark, and the weak light coming from under the door wasn't helping much. Relaxing my muscles, I let go of my axe and pulled my covers up to my cheek, wondering what sort of crazy dream I had just been having for it to seem so real. My heartbeat slowed down again, and the nearly-tangible drifting of sleep drifted over me, an almost unnoticeable pressure resting on my head and eyes.

The pounding started up all over again. I threw my covers aside and jumped up in a smooth motion, my axe readied to be thrown. The room remained still.

Squinting in the darkness, I pushed open my door and walked into the living room. Dad was snoring just as loud as usual, drowning out any sounds that crept in from the outside. I stalked over to the door, resting my fingers on the knob. With a swift thrust I had swung it open and crouched low, axe held high with both hands.

Snotlout held both hands up, eyes wide. Even in the pale moonlight, I could see that he was covered in sweat and shaking from exertion. Which only meant one thing.

"Ugh, Snotlout!" I hissed. "I don't want to work out! You're lucky you didn't wake my parents up! Now go home." I started to shut the door again, supremely annoyed that I had been woken up for something so trivial, but he grabbed the door and held it open.

"No," he gasped. He set his eyes on mine and choked out, "It's Hiccup. He's back."

My axe nearly fell to the ground. I shot a look over my shoulder and stepped outside, inching the door shut. "What do you mean?" I whispered. "You saw him?"

Snotlout nodded, finally starting to catch his breath. "Uncle Stoick and my dad were planning the next trading route. They made me come so I could see how it's done." He paused again and said, "But dad left one of the maps at home and sent me to go get it. When I was walking backâ€¦it was so weird. He just slid out in front of me and smacked into that shed. He saw me and he just _stared_."

"Well, did you do something?" I demanded. Hiccup wasn't here, so clearly _something_ either went very wrong or very right. Considering how shifty the traitor was, I doubted it was the latter.

He nodded, eyebrows lowering. "Yeahâ€¦" I yelled at him, but I didn't want to get too close because I still haven't gotten my sword fixed. All I had was this," he pulled out a dagger completely devoid of blemishes, "but he didn't look too threatened by it. Not like he used to. I asked him why he was here and he pretended not to know, and then for some reason he tried to get really close to me andâ€¦" Snotlout took a deep breath. "You know that look on his face when Tuffnut almost fell? He was looking at me exactly like that."

That seemed like a far shot. From everything I had learned about dragons, he should have gone for the kill out of spite as the _best-_case scenario. "Are you _sure?_ Why would he care about us after everything that happened?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Snotlout said. "And right after that, he almost fell just like he did when he saw Uncle Stoick. So I said 'Hiccup', and he just went crazy! He ran away and hit the shed and _broke_ it, and then he started hurting himself with his claws and screaming and rolling around like I'd stabbed him or something!" He quivered, and said much more quietly, "Then he looked right at me again and wrote on the ground."

What?! But Hiccupâ€"no, that _dragon_â€"couldn't still have traces of humanity if he was killing people! He had stopped being human long ago! If he could still write, then that meant that he knew exactly what he was doing every time he murdered someone. That meantâ€¦no, it was impossible!

"What did it say?" I said, my voice nearly catching in my throat.

"I'm so sorry'," Snotlout said, and the words were heavier than a mountain. "Then he ran into the forest."

I leaned up against my house, trying to take it all in. Sorry? About what? He had a lot to be sorry for, and a lot of reasons to try and kill his former cousin instead of making amends. He was a _dragon_. They don't show remorse! It just didn't make any sense, unless he was playing mind gamesâ€¦trying to get us to lower our guard before he struck again.

My eyes widened. He _had_ to be doing that, especially if he was smart enough to be able to write. There was no other explanation to explain why that beast would come here, seemingly alone, and try to make us like him again. "We have to find him," I said. "Right now. There's no time to get the others."

Snotlout gave a shaky nod. "I need something better than this," he said, holding up his little dagger.

A quick steak into the house later, Snotlout had himself a nice mace and I was in proper hunting attire. We shared a look and sprinted back where it had all began.

We were ending this once and for all. This had gone on for long

enough.

* * *

><p>Aaand that's it! After this, we're going to go back to updating only on IHHS, and _**Unheard Whispers **_**will return to its drabble formula.**>

If you haven't checked out IHHS, then head on over there! Otherwise, thanks for reading!

Have an awesome day,

~Rift-Raft

5. Time

Hello, everyone!

Hopefully you're here either because you're already following **_Unheard Whispers **_**or because you got my note from **_**I Hear Him Scream. **_**Either way, glad you're here!**

I apologize for how long this took meâ€”I originally was going to post a few other things, but seeing as they were all very far from the IHHS timeline where it was left off, I decided it would be a little mean to leave it there and then post something that doesn't address it directly.

So, as promisedâ€”here is one of the many mini-epilogues! Enjoy!

Have an awesome day,

Rift-Raft

* * *

><p>The Nightmare bared her teeth and snarled. Dad drew his sword with one hand and shoved me behind him with the other. Villagers and dragons alike scattered around in the street in a mad dash to get out of the way of the most notoriously short-tempered dragon on Berk and, of course, the most notoriously overprotective father on Berk.<p>

Toothless and I exchanged a look and sighed. _This is getting annoying._

"_Dad_," I whined, stepping forward and holding a hand up to the Nightmare. She dropped her eyes and hurt pride, lowering her head and mumbling a meek, respectful hiss-growl. "Don't worry about it," I told her, "but you know you're also responsible for this."

"That's right," Dad said, and he cracked a small grin when I raised a brow at him. "Don't blame meâ€”that dragon clearly wanted to bite you." He sheathed his sword and brushed his shirt off, as if checking to make sure there wasn't an ember or two smoldering on it.

"Actually, she was clearly trying to be nice," I said. A hiss rose from the back of my throat, long and deep, and I forced it down. She had merely been excited, crop full and eager to offer her greatest catch to Toothless and myself. Still, this had not been the first time Dad perceived enthusiasm as aggression; this dragon in particular had nearly been diced three times now by my father's snakelike reflexes, which still took hold whenever a dragon did anything unexpected around me. I turned to him, explaining, "It's customary to give your King or Queen your best catch. It's a show of respect."

Dad hummed in exactly the way I knew he wasn't listening; his eyes were still following the Nightmare, his arm sprung out to defend me still held like a shield in front of my chest. Toothless nudged me and nodded at her, giving a concerned rumble followed by a short bark. Before I could protest he had run off after her, happy to leave me with the joyful task of explaining dragon social behavior to my father.

Again.

I glared at the stupid jerk when he glanced over his shoulder with a grin. He quickly turned around and pretended that he hadn't noticed.

"No sauce for you tonight!" I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted after him. I noticed a sudden, pained gasp come from his direction and rolled my eyes, turning to Dad. He had an amused look to his eyes, and slapped a hand on my shoulder.

"Well, back to work, then," he proclaimed, walking back down the road and pushing me forward with him.

"Dad, you know you can't just threaten people like that," I began. Dad sighed his "here we go" sigh that I had come to love, but I went on, "Seriously, these dragons are our friends. Just because they move really suddenly towards me doesn't mean you have to throw yourself in front of me and take out all your weapons."

"It was just one this time!" Dad said.

"Well, how about none?" I groaned.

Dad's smile fell. He moved his hand from my back to my shoulder and stopped. We stood in the center of the road with the sun beating down, surrounded by people running errands and dragons flocking about. Quite a few glanced over, curious, but we were not given the staring treatment that Toothless and I had become accustomed to. I looked into his eyes for as long as I could until I had to look away.

"Hiccup," Dad sighed. "I know that it's...that I've been difficult. But things like this...well, I still feel like a madman every time I let you near thatâ€"every time you go outside. It takes time."

Frustration rose within me at his slip-up, quelled only by his attempt to stop himself from speaking it, from believing it. "Three weeks?" I pressed with an overly-aggravated tone, lip raising to show

teethâ€"and immediately regretted it. Dad's face fell, and his hand slid from my shoulder.

We stood there, silent, as Berk bustled around us and the air grew still.

"I can't lose you again."

I looked at my feet, face burning. A pit seemed to open up in my heart and swallow everything in sight like a starved animal.

"I-I...sorry, Dad," I stuttered. I almost leaned forward to press my forehead against his chest, but stopped myself, knowing I'd just make his fears deepen. "I know it's a lot, it's just...easy for me to forget about it. I know I'm not making it any better," I mumbled the last bit, half-hoping he wouldn't hear it.

Dad clapped his hand over my shoulder again. He gave a much weaker, forced smile. "I _am _getting better, though. And so are you."

I returned the look, but it hurt just a little bit. "Yeah. I can walk pretty well, at least," I said with a small shake of my prosthetic.

That wasn't what he meant and both of us knew it, but Dad still nodded and pressed on. We continued walking down the street with little conversation left. When Toothless returned, having finally decided it was safe to interrupt, he reared up just enough so he could press his forehead against mine and purred.

* * *

><p>"Toothless, I'm really worried."<p>

"What's new?" I asked, curling around Hiccup just a little tighter.

We had retreated to our previous home: the cove, with its collapsed walls, its lake still enough to trap a piece of the sunset sky in the ground. It was a great idea at firstâ€"a retreat that very few dragons and humans would think to look for us, so deep it was in the wilderness. We'd forgotten how difficult it would be to get out, but that was something to worry about later. Hiccup's father would be cross that we wouldn'tâ€"well, that _Hiccup_ wouldn't return when expected, but I honestly didn't care.

Hiccup twisted his tiny body around so that his cheek rested on my side. His skin was healthier now, reddish and matted with the freckles that traveled across his skin like the constellations used in long-distance flights. Still, his eyes were cast in shadows, dark as the nightmares that he pretended to forget.

Our eyes met. I strained to pull the link forward, but lacked the proper magicâ€"it had been purely Hiccup's. I could only hypothesize why I could force it previously. I believed that it had something to do with the Queen's constant presence of her magic; maybe Hiccup had unconsciously done so with our link, and it required only to be "nudged", per se, into existence. The problem now was that it needed to be reformed from nothing, when previously it would lie in wait for the slightest spark.

Hiccup bit his lip, face scrunched with concentration. I felt a phantom twinge, a flash of alien frustration, but it was merely from the strain I placed on my own magic. We both let up in unison, breathing out long sighs.

"Well, it's worth the shot," Hiccup said, and I nodded. He was quiet.

"So, you were saying?" I asked, nudging him with my hind leg.

Hiccup looked at his "_fingers_", as he called them, twisting them about each other. "I just...I feel like even though everyone's been great, and there aren't any raids anymore, that something's still wrong."

I nodded. "Well, that's more than expected. We can't just expect everyone to welcome us in without a hint of gas in their mouths."

Hiccup took a second, looking at me, focusing. After a full minute he gave up responding to exactly what I'd said, and I forced myself not to look away, not to let my calm expression slip.

"It's...Dad'sâ€|" Hiccup stopped himself.

I poked him again with my hind paw, careful not to push him head over tail. "You're tiptoeing around it," I said with a raised brow. As encouragement I flicked my head and raised my ears and side-frills as noticeably as possible.

"I know, I know," Hiccup said, sounding scolded. In a flash I wondered how harshly I had come off to him, if I had sounded annoyedâ€"oh, gods, _had I? _"I just don't like talking about it. I don't like thinking about it." He frowned, casting a dark gloom across his face. "I mean, how selfish could I possibly be?"

What? _Selfish? _He was anything but. I shook my head and growled, "_No_."

Hiccup faced me, eyes wide and jaw clenched. "Yes," he said. "Because even though everything is over, I'm still a dragon to Dad." I reared back, eyes wide and heart hammering, and could not think of anything as my brother choked out, "But I _want _to be. I _want _to hold onto it. I know it's stupid and crazy, but I guess you can call me a madman because I don't want to pretend it never happenedâ€"andâ€"and Toothless, sometimes I know that even though I'm like this, Iâ€"!" He bore into me with eyes that reflected the fear in my own, eyes that pooled with agony and terror and hurt, and heaved a deep and shuddering breath.

"I don't remember what it's like to be human and he _hates it!_"

_Can you reverse it? _his voice echoed from that night long ago, and I lunged at him and yanked him into my embrace.

"Oh, Hiccup," I murmured, curling in on him and drawing my wings up over him. I held him tight, pressing him against my chest. He grabbed on, his paws tiny, and buried his nose into the crook of my neck. The pain I felt for him wracked at my insides like lightning thundering

into the earth, and though he did not weep, I didâ€”if as quietly as I could, to spare him from the guilt.

I clutched him for a long time, just until he started shifting ever-so-slightly. Then I squeezed him hard one last time and let go, leaning down and pressing my forehead against his.

"It's okay," I said, making each word distinct from the other. Slow as a vine I sat up and stood, and Hiccup went up with me. He was still wobbly like a newborn calfâ€”having to adjust both to walking bipedally and with a metal _thing _for a legâ€”but followed me to the lake's edge without trouble.

I rolled a stray stone close to me, brought here from the landslide those many seasons ago, and flicked it into the reflection of the dimming sky. The lake rippled, distorting its perfect image. Quickly I turned to Hiccup and pointed at the disrupted lake, and then him. He blinked and gazed out at the lake.

Eventually the distortions stilled, and it was just as smooth as it had been before. This time I swept out a paw, encompassing the entirety of it, and again pointed at Hiccup.

"It'll get betterâ€”no matter what," I soothed.

He smiled and let out something that was half a relieved laugh, half a stifled sob. I brought a wing around and held him against me.

"It just takes time, huh?" He asked, nuzzling his cheek against mine. He let a tiny, throaty sound leave himâ€”something that, anatomically, translated from a purr in dragons to a purr in humans. I nodded, thanking the gods for the thousandth time that I was still here, that he had _someone _to feel himself around. "Thanks, Toothless."

I gave a soft croon, my new "gratitude-related" sound I'd picked for easy translating, and let my eyes slip half-closed. "And you still have me, Hiccup. That will never change." To emphasize this I tightened my wing against him and headbutted him, making extra-sure to mess up his fur. Hiccup groaned and laughed at the same time, waving me off frantically when I threatened to lick him.

Hiccup batted at my ear before taking a step back and widening his stance. "Actually, Toothless, you know who said that to me today?" His grin was real, eyes soft. He looked like he'd just realized something, like it had finally clicked in that stubborn brain of his.

"A wise dragon," I said. "Me."

"Nope." He lowered his voice, as if telling a secret. "_My Dad._"

I pushed him into the lake.

* * *

><p>"Hiccup! Where have you _been?! _I've been searching everywhere, I've had your friends and their dragons look for you, I've even tried talking to the ones outside...and..._why_ are you wet?"

Hiccup and I glanced at each other and snickered like hatchlings being scolded for roughhousing. The King ran a paw over his face in exasperation and motioned us inside the nest, shutting the wooden thing behind him to close us in. The sounds of night insects dimmed, and it took my eyes a second to adjust to the firelit interior of the nest.

Fresh fear-scent hit me, and suddenly it wasn't so funny anymore. I stopped and watched Hiccup's father as he shed the fur he wore and draped it around his son, who was quick to insist that he was fine. My eyes met his, and instead of bristling at the accusation within them, I almost felt...guilty.

I shrugged it off, looking away. Hiccup wasn't a fragile little twig. He didn't need to be tended to every second of his life, worried over like an ill elder, and the King was going to have to learn it the hard way if he kept this up.

Still, memories of this morning swept back to me. Fear-scent. His heart thrashing in his chest, audible even above the midday commotion. I can't lose you again.

My eyes dragged back over to the King, who had his arms crossed and was staring incredulous as Hiccup waved his paws about, skipping around how exactly he was soaked to the bone in the middle of the night without actually saying that I'd knocked him into a lake. I was definitely understanding the "disappointed scowl" that Hiccup had always spoken of, but now I could see something underneath it: anger not directed at his son, but at the world around him, the world that had ripped him from his home and turned them on one another before piecing the broken bits back together again as a poor replacement.

Hiccup had always been insistent on me being "nicer" to his father, as if I was actually being rude to him—which I was not. But that didn't mean I had to treat him with anything other than grudging respect, right? Because after the first couple of days, after everyone had spewed apologies left and right with varying sincerity, the King had focused solely on getting Hiccup back on his feet. Literally, at that. This was fine, but it was overshadowed by his impressive focus on trying to push Hiccup's time as a dragon behind him, knowing that his reversion was unwilling.

He was like Hiccup in that he avoided uncomfortable topics. Hell, Hiccup was doing it right in front of me. But as abrupt as a viper's strike, I was pulled out of my biased perspective and considered...what the enemy must have felt.

But he wasn't the enemy anymore, as difficult as it was for me to accept it. The war was over, the Queen dead. Hiccup and I had suffered great pain and loss by the hands of the humans that we now lived with, but as much as it burned me to admit it, they had from us as well.

He was the King. That was easy for me to remember, to blame him for. While it was not news to me that he was Hiccup's father, though, the implications of it were...much easier for me to push away. He had thought his son had dissolved away into a monster, and had tried time and time again to rid the world of him—only to realize that Hiccup

had been _Hiccup _the entire time. That he had been sentient. Aware. Afraid.

I can't lose you again.

Hiccup had stopped speaking, looking to me expectantly. I nodded, wondering absently what excuse I was affirming, but my wide eyes were locked on the King. Gods, I _hated _it when Hiccup's open-mindedness rubbed off on me!

"See?" Hiccup said.

"Don't do it again." His father nudged him towards the hill that led upstairs. "Now go put some new clothes on before you get sick."

We tramped up the uneven, sharp-edged hill into the small cavern that Hiccup called his "_room_", and when Hiccup had changed into different furs he sat down on his sleeping platform with a sigh. I climbed up onto it and lay my head on my paws, and Hiccup stretched out against my side. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply.

"Want to sneak out later?" He murmured, already slipping into unconsciousness. I certainly _wanted _to; neither of us felt very comfortable sleeping in the claustrophobic nest, and it was almost customary now to go out to sleep and sneak back in just before Hiccup's father woke up at sunrise.

I perked my ears, listening out of the cavern for the King. I heard him give a deep sigh, and the creak of the hill as he ascended. Hiccup's breathing had evened out by now; he'd been a lot more tired than he let on.

The King poked his head in, worry creasing his features upon seeing Hiccup dead asleep so quickly. "Is he...alright?" He asked, and the familiar anxiety, that which I had just heard from Hiccup by the lake, sent a burst of adrenaline spiking through my chest. It took me a second, but I nodded several times.

He stood there awkwardly, reluctant to leave. I wanted to jerk my head, scare him off, something! This was unbearable!

The King stepped in, coming over and crouching to mine and Hiccup's eye level. He laid a hand on Hiccup's chest and seemed to hold his breath, as if fearing that it would not rise. "He's still afraid of me."

He said it in such a sullen and resigned manner that I actually felt pity. His eyes, the same color of my brother's, were locked on my own. I found myself looking away, screaming internally at Hiccup to wake up. This was...gods, I was _not _the dragon to be asking this kind of advice!

"Talk to him about it," I whispered, gesturing at Hiccup with a nod. But the King had not spent seasons with dragons; he wasn't like Hiccup, who could get the general concept of something out of what seemed like nothing to other humans.

The King brushed Hiccup's fur aside and stood up. "I know you two steal away at night just to sleep somewhere else. I know you avoid me." He closed his eyes and took a great breath. "And I know I'm in

no place to ask you of this, but...if there is any way to help...to show me how to help him...would you?"

He had his arms crossed, but his paws were grasping them tightly, and his breathing was faint and uneven. I scowled dark and furious at him, wanting to spew all my hatred at him when Hiccup wasn't awake to hold me back. _Maybe you shouldn't pretend everything is fine and dandy_, I wanted to scream. _Maybe you shouldn't make him feel like you hate him. Maybe you should accept him for once in your miserable life._

He dropped his eyes, and his entire form seemed to crumble in on itself, making him so much smaller. With nothing but a soft sigh he turned and began to pad out of the room.

And, Dragoness of the Moon above, I felt _sorry _for him. The nagging "what would Hiccup do" feeling came back, and I shook my head and nearly groaned.

"Wait," I whispered, just loud enough to get his attention. He spun around, disbelief and a hint of hope rising from his defeated expression. I hesitated a moment, both to steel myself and make sure I wasn't shooting him with a nasty look, and nodded once.

The King smiled at meâ€"he actually _smiled_. At _me. _"Thank you...Toothless."

6. Conversations

****Hello, everyone!****

****I want to thank you all for all of the reviews and favs/follows! It's so great to see how excited everyone was for the most recent update. Here's another continuation!****

****Have a great day,****

****Rift-Raft****

*** * ***

><p>We found them sitting on a grassy cliffside overlooking the ocean, the ocean spray coating them in the smell of brine.<p>

"Alright, say it again," Hiccup said, leaning forward with his leg half-crossed and arms awkwardly planted straight ahead. His prosthetic lay discarded on the ground in front of him; had he been wearing it, the animalistic sitting position he'd put himself in would have been far too uncomfortable to stand. The Night Furyâ€"rather, Toothless, he'd been inappropriately namedâ€"was in the exact same position. Despite the sheer difference in size and flexibility, they were mirror images of each other, eyes locked together and brows furrowed in concentration.

Toothless made a gurgling sound, loud and slow. Hiccup watched him attentively, absorbing all of the information as it came in like his life depended on it. He nodded slowly, then leaned back with a small smile.

"Welp, that's ironic," he laughed. Toothless raised his brow and grunted. "Well, it is!" Hiccup exclaimed, only to laugh when the dragon rolled his eyes with about as much exaggeration put into the gesture as physically possible.

Stormfly and I exchanged a glance. She fluttered her wings and squawked loudly, then sunk into a deep bow. I had to duck to avoid her wing as she pushed it out as far as it would go—"something that had become almost second-nature to everyone on Berk, with how often dragons would greet Hiccup and Toothless in such a way.

Both of them gave little head bobs in return to Stormfly. Toothless' ears were lowered and he'd opened his wings up, clearly aggravated at the interruption. No surprise there; I'd like to make things right with both of them, but Toothless seemed reluctant to accept me as anything other than a dangerous annoyance. Hiccup just looked uncomfortable, fixing himself into a more natural sitting position and hurriedly clipping his prosthetic back on.

"Uh...h-hey, Astrid," he stammered, glancing at his friend and back at me. "What's up?"

"Hey," I said. I walked over carefully, trying to keep my body language open and friendly. Sitting down a few feet away from Hiccup, I asked, "What'cha doing?"

Hiccup's eyes lit up a little bit. "I'm talking to Toothless."

I looked at Stormfly, but she was too busy preening her wing. I'd come to the conclusion not soon after we'd met that she didn't understand human speech too well. Knowing her, she was probably spacing out and then would get confused once I got up to leave.

"What do you mean?" I said, drawing my eyes back over to Hiccup. "Don't you always do that?"

Hiccup nodded. Toothless gave me his "go away" look that he gave only the most special of Vikings, complete with a huff and a flick of his head. Of course, Hiccup was quick to notice the dragon's blatant rudeness and waved an arm at him to stop.

He let up for just long enough for Hiccup to look away, and then went right back to it.

"Well, yeah," Hiccup said, shifting in place, "but it's a lot of guessing on my part. So I'm trying to be able to learn how to interpret what he's saying better." He smiled and turned to Toothless. "It's actually not that hard...with him. Toothless, say 'yes' and 'no' again."

Wait, there was actually a difference? That was...that was incredible! To think that Hiccup could figure it out—to possibly be able to teach others! I leaned in, focusing on the dragon's expression and body language.

Toothless gave two short barks, the last one ending in a soft hiss. Stormfly jumped and reared her head, holding her wings up and stomping a foot. Hiccup narrowed his eyes.

"That is not it and you know it," he scolded. "Also, rude."

Toothless assumed a wide-eyed innocent look, crooning and tipping his head to the side.

"Yeah, I'm not buying it," I said. "Still, that's so cool that you can tell the difference between them! That must be so great for you two!"

To my surprise, he frowned, deflating as if I'd told him it was stupid. "Yeah," he said. "The only problem is that the grammar is nothing like our own. Dragons can get a lot of information across in only a few words. It has a lot to do with body language, I think, but then..." He sat up straight and looked at Toothless. "Wait, how were we able to speak to each other in the Kill Ring, then?"

My blood turned cold. Toothless said something in response and started making gestures with his paws, but I'd stopped paying attention. The dragons could communicate between each other in the Ringâ€”meaning that...that...

Those dragons really had sacrificed themselves for Hiccup and Toothless on that day. We'd all had our suspicions, but it was just too awkward to ask Hiccup anything about his time as a dragon. Not after all that we'd learned he'd gone through, most of it by the hands of his own people.

"Yeah, but from what I've seen, there's a lot of eye contact and facial movements andâ€”I know, I know, butâ€”eh. I'll figure it out later. Good try, Toothless."

Hiccup turned to me, but my eyes lingered on the Night Fury, taking in the pain in his eyes, the way his ears and frills drooped, how he curled in on himself just a little bit and dropped his gaze to the earth. I tried to imagine what it was like, being forced to turn an entire relationship into yes or no questions just for the sake of clarity, and with only a few other words peppered in between. How suddenly there was an unwelcome species barrier.

Because Hiccup never said anything, but it was obvious that he had never wanted to change back.

Toothless noticed me looking and wrinkled his nose, throwing his head.

I sighed and stood up. Stormfly jumped to attention with a startled yelp. "Well, just to let you know, Gobber's going nuts that you're a no-show. Again. He even pulled me over just to tell me to find you and yell at you." I smiled when Hiccup groaned, running a hand over his face.

"Ugh. Thanks, Astrid," Hiccup said, standing up and wobbling a little. I nodded, waiting for him to say anything else.

After a few seconds, I said, "Uh...yeah. No problem." Turning away, I put a hand on Stormfly's neck and set back off to the village.

"Hey, Astrid?"

I stopped short, looking over my shoulder.

Hiccup grinned, eyes lighting up. "Want to know something funny?"

I forced a smile and nodded. Hiccup craned his neck forward like an owl spotting its prey.

"The words 'dragon' and 'human' sound almost exactly the same."

7. What Was Hidden: Part 1

****Hello, everyone! I hope that you have all had a great holiday and new year!****

****Here is something that I've been working on (and that is still unfinished), but has grown far too long for me to update all at once. So, more updates for Unheard Whispers! ****

****As always, thank you very much for reading this, and please feel free to leave concrit. There's more to come soon!****

* * *

><p>The children were out playing.<p>

She watched them from her door, leaning against the frame with a content smile. They were loud and rambunctious, but they were hers. They had beautiful auburn hair like molten copper woven into silk strands, their eyes the harsh blue of their father. They would grow to be the strongest warriors, the most beautiful Vikings to ever grace their peaceful village.

They were her entire world.

She breathed in the crisp spring air and let it out, closing her eyes to enjoy the sounds of her children's happy squeals mingling with birdsong and rhythmic ocean waves. Married to a stranger, one would think they would be unhappy. Yet in her darkest time she found love—she found life. She lifted her hand and ran delicate fingers over her stomach.

Soon, she thought. Her eyes drifted back up to her children.

She could not think of a single moment where she was as happy as she was then.

* * *

><p>The children were late for dinner.<p>

They had been out playing, and had yet to return. A tight knot had formed around her heart and clenched tight, making her dizzy with fear. She paced the tiny house they called home, wringing her hands together. Her eyes darted out every window, looking over every hill in hopes of seeing her beloved ones charging over one another in a flurry of life and excitement.

"Damn you, woman," her husband growled. He grabbed her on her fifth

go around the table and threw her down into a chair, positioning himself to block her view. "Calm down."

All of her anxiety burst out in a rush, "But the children!"

The door pounded open. She sank into her chair, exhaling a breath that she felt she had been holding for hours. Little feet scampered on the floor, high-pitched voices exclaiming to their parents what they found, who beat who in a fight, who should be grounded for this, who got in trouble with the neighbors for that. Her daughter even mentioned some mythical creature, swearing that such things exist, just further up north.

A sharp _slap _rang throughout their humble home. A hand flew up to her mouth, her other reaching out to her stunned child. The poor thing couldn't rip her gaze off her father, tears glossing her beautiful eyes and a handprint the color of blood on her cheek.

"We will not speak of such things in my house," her husband said. "Such talk can easily brand you a fool or heretic."

Her daughter, her wonderful daughter, began crying then. She ran to the tiny room she and her siblings called their own, slamming the old door in a weak semblance of privacy. Her sobs filled the house, and the supper that followed was silent and cold.

* * *

><p>The children were sleeping.<p>

She waited until her husband's breathing grew deep and even and slunk out of bed, cringing when his breath hitched. She stopped at the door, watching his chest rise up and down in the darkness. She waited to feel something, whether it be fear or anger or love, but found herself impartial. He was a part of her life, and that was all.

She tiptoed through the tiny home and out the door, into the cool, bleak night. The moon was gone, allowing a great wave of stars to fill its place. They were beautiful, like little dewdrops reflecting some far-off light that she couldn't see. They perfectly illuminated the land about her: the stony cliffside that seemed to shoot straight up behind her house, the small field between hers and her neighbors' houses, the few windswept trees that never lasted too long.

For a moment, something flickered. The hairs on her neck stood on end, and a deep chill rattled her body. She shivered, holding her arms close, and peered back and forth. The village was small, but no light shone from a single house. She was alone.

Or so it seemed.

It was a terrifying thought. Her mind flew to her children. Beautiful. Lively. Vulnerable.

She was at their door before she could blink, seconds away from slamming it open. With a calmness she did not know herself to possess, she forced herself to open it quietly.

They were fine.

She let out a sigh, shutting the door and leaning her head against it. Again her skin crawled and she felt a presence around her, malevolent and slimy.

It's just my imagination, she thought. _It will leave._

* * *

><p>The children were not home.<p>

She went about her busy day, filling her mind with chores instead of worries. Her husband had cornered her that past night when the children had gone to bed, snapping at her about her persistent anxiety.

The children can take care of themselves, he'd said. _You can't coddle them forever. They'll grow weak and useless if you keep this up._

She'd meekly nodded along whilst thinking, _But _I _am strong. _I _will protect them. They are not men and women grown; they need protection._

If only she could speak so bold.

She went outside to check on their tiny, shriveling garden. The livestock had long died out; she'd have to hope that her husband would return with some meat. She got to work tending to the dead plants, the ones infected with little black and white spots, the ones that were unable to withstand the winter's cold.

Goosebumps littered her arms. Her chest filled with a sharp, fluttering spikes of pain.

In an instant she was standing straight up, hand flitting to her small sword. She looked around. Nothing was abnormal, but her body screamed at her to run insideâ€"and fast.

She glanced back over at the cliff. It was only a few strides away, towering over her home. She saw nothing out of the usual.

Her first instinct was to go find her children. But as she began to walk around the house, her husband's words flowed back to her.

Perhapsâ€|she was just overthinking itâ€|.?

Reluctantlyâ€"very _reluctantlyâ€"she returned back to her garden work. She was just tired. Everything would be fine.

* * *

><p>The children were ecstatic, barely keeping themselves in her sights with their excitement.<p>

She desperately tried to reel them towards her, pulling their grabbing hands away from the _thing _and trying to place them behind her. They shrieked about mythical creatures again, no longer fearful of being reprimanded now that they had proof in flesh and blood.

It had been brought in by one of the warriors, screeching like a devil and snapping at anything that came close to it. Never before had such a creature been seen, only heard of in passing. It seemed that the northerners had been right, after all.

It was the size of a housecat, with limbs of a newt and wings unlike any bird she had ever seen. Its body was marred with spines that reminded her of rubble in a landslide, and its teeth were just as crooked and snagged. It had a muzzle that looked partially like a donkey's snout and ended in a beak, and its eyes were so massive that it seemed to see everything around it.

Fear swept through the very few villagers that inhabited their humble little island. It was put in a cage and left there for hours, squawking and gnawing at the bars all the while. At one point, the thing even spat fire, as if it were born of a volcano.

Eventually it was decided to be put to death. Such a creature was unholy, an ill omen. It was muzzled and taken outside so that it would not damage anything in what few buildings they had. A butcher slung his knife down upon its neck, the splatter of blood painting the ground.

The poor children cried for hours.

* * *

><p>The children were no longer excited to see the dragons.<p>

They clung to her and screamed as one swooped overhead into the brisk night. The shrieks turned to sobs as a house suddenly exploded, flinging shrapnel in every direction. She held onto them and rushed them away from their house, her legs and arms weak with terror. Her husband had rushed off to fight the monsters and was nowhere to be found.

The entire island was alive with fire and blood. She looked to her left and saw a man staggering in a circle, one arm gone but for a stump shooting blood onto the grass. She looked right, and saw a house collapse, the shrill cries of its inhabitants flooding her ears for but a moment before drowning in the roar of the flames.

She looked forward, and saw a dragon.

Its scales were as gray as the cliffside, its body so full of spines it was a wonder it didn't impale itself. She skidded to a stop to rush her children away, but it was too late; the dragon had set its eyes on them and trotted forward on its wings and hind legs, teeth bared.

The children whimpered and clung to her legs, and she squared her feet and threw them behind her back.

"Stay back, beast!" She growled, unsheathing her sword.

The dragon lowered its head so that their eyes were on the same level. It made a low, rumbling noise—"bafflingly close to that of a cat"—and leaned in. It never lost eye contact, growing closer and closer.

Her skin prickled. Her hair stood on end. Her chest filled with sharp anxiety pains. And she knew.

"You'veâ€|been watching me," she mumbled, flabbergasted.

The dragon tilted its head and brought itself closer yet. It stared at her with wide pupils, its muzzle inches from her face.

Then it reached a claw out and gently grabbed her around the waist, tugging her close and crooning.

She felt her heart stop, her legs go weak. Her body locked up, refusing to flee no matter how much she howled at it to move. In her mind's eye she saw herself incinerated to ashes, her beautiful children watching their mother die before their very eyes.

The dragon's claws fastened tighter, and it leaned its forehead into hers. She whimpered, finally finding herself enough to twist her head away and break the contact with the beast. She tried to pull free, but her trembling limbs made any attempt at escape a feeble one.

The dragon's eyes grew wider and tilted its head. It purred and chirped, tightening its hold on her.

"G-getâ€|backâ€|," she stuttered. She was so terrified, she could barely see straight. "M-monsterâ€|"

The demon reeled back, jaw opening ever-so-slightly and eyes filling withâ€|something. It stared at her, appalled. Its hold loosened.

It was enough.

With all the strength she had in her, she flung her body to the side and put all of her weight in her wielding arm, driving the sword deep into the dragon's shoulder. It roared as though she'd severed its limbs from its body, releasing her in its pain.

"_Run!_" She commanded to her children, spinning around and pushing them forward. They hesitated, then turned and sprinted away as fast as they would go. When they were far enough away she whipped around to face the dragon, bringing her sword forward.

Its eyes flicked over her shoulder. It bared its teeth.

"_Stop!_" She screamed, thrusting the weapon out before she could think. She managed to just barely make contact with the dragon's neck as it passed, but a simple swipe of its wing had her sailing back through the air.

She smacked into the ground so hard the world went black. When it returned not a second later she scrambled dizzily to her feet, taking in the horror before her.

Her children were running as fast as they could. But they were so small, so young. The dragon galloped like a charging destrier, its yellow eyes locked on them. It took it one, two boundsâ€|

"_NO!_" She scrambled until she was upright and forced herself into a drunken run. An explosion nearby toppled her to the ground, and she could only watch.

It got to her daughter first. She had enough time to look over her shoulder and see the demon before it was upon her, raking its claws through her fragile body. It grabbed her head in its jaws and shook and shook and _shook_. Her flailing arms and legs suddenly went limp.

Dropping her precious child like a rotten bit of food, the dragon swept its tail around and dragged her sons towards it. It brought one claw-filled paw down on one, ripping deep into him from chest to hip. Taking him up in its jaws, it flung him aside into the darkness. Then it turned to her last son, cowering against the earth. It made sure to peer down at him before puffing up and spewing a torrent of flame onto him.

She couldn't see what remained, her eyes were so blurred by the tears, her entire body rattling from the unbearable sight before her. She screamed wordlessly into the night, pulling herself to her knees and hugging herself with clawed hands. She howled again, a throat-splitting sound that rattled her entire body. Then again. Then again.

The dragon was coming for her, but she didn't care. She couldn't stop seeing it happen. Her childrenâ€”they couldn't beâ€”!

It was suddenly in front of her again, its enormous eyes level with hers. It grabbed her shoulders with its bloodied claws and pressed their foreheads together again. Purring, it withdrew and squeezed her shoulders. Clenching its eyes shut, it bowed its head and stopped moving altogether.

A deep, prickling pain crept from her shoulders to the outreaches of her body. She was brought out of her pain by something of an altogether different sort.

Her body lit on fire from the inside out, and an agony unrivaled pulled her limb from limb until a great bolt of fire laced her entire being apart.

* * *

><p>Her children wereâ€”|her children wereâ€”|<p>

"Finallyâ€”|my love."

Something nudged her. She moaned, swatting a heavy limb at her husband. She'd had the worst nightmareâ€”she just needed some rest, some time to recoverâ€”|

"Now, don't be like that. We can't have you killed by these pathetic wretches. Not after all of my hard work."

She forced her eyes open, taking in the hell surrounding her. Fires, crushed houses, blood, screams of pain and fear. Every inch of her felt as though it had been burned so thoroughly it could no longer feel, like she'd been bathed in magma. Again she let out a wheezy cry, her hands clenching and unclenching. "My children," she croaked, her eyes sliding shut.

Whoever was speaking to her pushed gently at her chin. "Please, my

love, we must leave immediately. I know this is confusing, but these humans will kill you if we stay any longer!"

"Myâ€|myâ€|what?" She mumbled. She used all she could to pull her eyelids open and lift her head.

The dragon. It was there, staring at her. She flinched away, flying up onto her legs and falling backwardsâ€|

The body that tumbled to the ground was not hers. It was huge. It was covered in scales. It was lined with spines. It had extra appendagesâ€|a tail, and wings that fluttered at its side.

It had claws.

She stared at them, jaw working up and down. She clenched and unclenched her hands, and the claws that belonged to the creature that had possessed her moved accordingly.

The dragon leaned its long neck down and used its head to knock her back over onto her feet. She stood for a few seconds before her shaking legs gave out, unable to comprehendâ€|to even try to believe thatâ€|

"You look even more beautiful than you were before, my love," the dragon whispered. Had she not been so lost, she would have been surprised at its sudden ability to speak. It leaned in and nuzzled her. "Yesâ€|we're finally together."

"Youâ€|" She swallowed, forcing herself to her feet. "You monstrous _dragon! _How could you do this to me?!"

It tilted its head to the side. "To make you superior to all and to grant you a better life, my love. Human lives are so fleeting, after allâ€|a dragon's suits you scores better." A crooked smile split its terrible jaw. "Why, I didn't know you had it in you, to try to defy someone like me!"

"My children!" She screamed, rearing up and aiming a clumsy swipe at it. It easily avoided the attack, and she crumbled to the ground and sobbed, "Oh, gods, my beloved children! Why?! Why punish _them?! _Why not only me?"

"Merely distractions. You'll have more someday, I promise you." She lifted herself to her feet with her head hanging, nose wrinkling and teeth baring. Ignoring her, the monster went on, "Take this as your first lesson as one of us. As the superior species." The dragon leaned in again, nuzzling its cheek against hers. "Oh, how I love you. You became my entire world when I saw you. I was broken over the death of my mate, and then you appeared in the darkness." It gave a sigh. "Even as a human, you still looked like her. Iâ€|I knew that the gods had made a mistake, placing you in that useless body. You were always meant to be like this!"

She lunged.

She didn't need experience. Its neck was right there, filling her vision. She acted on impulse, thrusting her body forward and stretching her jaw as wide as it would go. She was about half the dragon's size, but still it fell to the ground with a shocked

gasp.

She clamped her jaw shut, the flesh underneath bursting like overripe fruit. With her claws she scraped at its scales, digging them deep into its flesh and tearing with all her might. She wrung her head back and forth until there was nothing left to hold onto and her mouth was coated with the musky taste of its blood, her nose filled with the revolting scent.

The dragon had had no time to react. She had moved fast—impossibly fast, so much so that her head was spinning. Its eyes inched towards her, clouding more and more with each second.

"But—I—" It inhaled deeply. "I love you—I want—I wanted t-t-to help y-you—"

"By killing my children?" She growled, staring it down. "By torturing them? By changing me into a _beast?_"

The dragon gave a long, shuddering breath. Its eyes unfocused, and its chest went still.

She gazed at its eyes for a moment that felt like it lasted forever. Then, with sudden and jerky movements, she flinched away and took slow, heavy steps away from it. She didn't know where she was going—just that she needed to be _away_.

She walked and walked and walked until she found herself alone, snapping out of her trance with a sudden slap of reality. There were no buildings, or people, or even sounds. Even the night insects had grown quiet with fear.

Her children—that dragon had—

She sat down, lifted her eyes to the heavens, and wailed.

* * *

><p>Her children were dead.<p>

She was a dragon.

* * *

><p>She was alone.<p>

The dragons had all left. She paced through the abandoned fields, occasionally coming upon an area that she dimly recognized. In that horrible night, the entire population of her village had been slaughtered. What had been loosely called their village square was nothing but rubble now, filled with the scent of death and smoke.

The livestock had all been taken. There were no forests large enough to support game. All that remained were the birds and rodents, none of which were slow enough for her to catch.

She spent two days stumbling to each and every house in fruitless search of survivors. By the end of the first day she could no longer speak. She had used up all of her voice begging for someone to answer

her, and had no more to give.

Eventually she came upon the corpses of her children.

She wept until she could produce no more tears, and then wept some more. She didn't stop until her chest ached and her wings hung limp at her side, her mouth dry and limbs unable to support her.

She couldn't bring herself to hold as good a funeral as she could for them. That would mean accepting that they were dead, that she was cursed to this body and all alone.

So she left them there.

* * *

><p>She was ready.<p>

Twelve days had passed. Twelve days of mourning. Twelve days of crying herself awake and to sleep. Twelve days of dehydration and starvation.

She was growing frail. She'd found herself staring longingly at the bodies of her villagemates and had forced herself to stumble away from them, refusing to allow herself to stoop so low. She'd spent the last of her energy fleeing into what wilderness the isle had.

She curled up in a ball and hissed as another spike of pain shot through her stomach.

Soon, my children, she thought. _Soon, your mother will hold you againâ€|soon, my sweet children._

* * *

><p>She was dying.<p>

Delirium brought with it hallucinations. She saw the dragon that had claimed to love her. She saw it transforming into her husband and then slaying her. She saw her children walking about regardless of their injuries. She saw the grass turn to a seeping ocean of blood, a sweltering and infected wound that dragged her down with it. She even saw another dragon. It swept down from the skies and spoke to her, but she did not care to listen to what it had to say.

She felt something wrap around her. The ground was suddenly far away.

She didn't know what it meant, but she supposed it was merely a trick of the mind in its final moments.

* * *

><p>She was warm.<p>

It was an unfamiliar sensation. She scooted closer to it, burying her head into its comfort.

"Hello, young one."

She stopped at once, lifting her head. The source of the warmth wasâ€|wasâ€|

A dragon with scales of fire offered her a weary smile. "Do not be frightened. I found you on a flight through the islands and carried you back here to safety." He nudged a fish towards her. "Eat."

It was gone before she could even consider. She licked her teeth, eyes flitting about for more. The dragon curled his slender body further around her and heaved. Then his jaws opened and a large clump of fish slid out.

It was repulsing. She wrinkled her nose, but her body screamed at her to eat the food. She tried to fight it, but instinct won over mind. The fish were gone in a heartbeat.

Hanging her head in shame and embarrassment, she mumbled, "Thank you."

"It is completely my pleasure," he soothed. For several minutes he was quiet.

"I beg that you do not take what I am about to say as arrogance." When she looked up, confused, he said, "I am a dragon of high intellect and magic prowess. More than enough to know that you were not born a dragon." He frowned, and said much more quietly, "What a terrible fate."

She tried to pull herself to her feet but was too weak, falling against his smooth side. "Wait!" She gasped. "Can youâ€|can you reverse it? Can you break the spell?"

The dragon shook his head sagely, and she crumpled against his side and heaved a sob. "I am so sorry. I wouldn't dareâ€|not in your condition. Surely it would kill you."

"Then do it!" She gasped. He jolted back, eyes wide. "Kill me! Put me back in my body and let me join my children!"

He gaped at her. "Suchâ€|such reckless words. To try to force your own death as suchâ€|it defies the very Dragoness of the Moon, who created you with all the love she has!"

"I don't care! Take the spell back and kill me, dragon!"

His long tail wrapped around her, the scales sparkling like embers. It was so warm, so comforting that her resolve flickered with uncertainty.

"I will not," he said. "If only I knew how the dragon did itâ€|," he shook his head with a growl. "Such a spell would surely kill you!"

She looked away. So that was it, then.

The dragon brought a wing up over her. "I am so, so sincerely sorry," he whispered. "I cannot attempt something that I am certain will end your life. I did not know that this was even possible, even with all my training. I will try to do what I can to help you, but to return you to your original formâ€|" He cut himself off with a deep

sigh.

"Help me?" She repeated.

The dragon nodded. "Yes. I will teach you to fly and hunt. I will try to teach you magic, but it feels veryâ€|different. The core of it lies not with your fire. Even so, perhapsâ€|you could be an apprentice of sorts. But only if it please you." He looked to her expectantly.

This dragon was offering to _help_ her? A complete stranger, an abomination?

"Who are you?" She gasped.

The dragon smiled. "You can call me Sphere."

8. What Was Hidden: Part 2

****Hey everyone! Sorry that this has taken so long. There will be one more part after this one.****

****I would like to thank Crysist, LorreVarguhl, Brenne, WingedRock, GoldenGriffiness, Mister Cuddlesworth, Anonymous Noob the 2****nd****, ShadowWolf203027, and everyone else for leaving such kind reviews! You guys rock.****

****Enjoy, and please feel free to leave concrit!****

She was Sphere's student.

Flight lessons had been painful, but relatively simple. Firebreathing was a bit more difficult because of her reluctance. Hunting was the same; she couldn't bring herself to use her teeth and claws again, not when every time she tried to use them she saw her children beneath her.

He even tried to teach her magic, but it was slow-going. She felt something thereâ€|something living and whirlingâ€|but she only reached a point before hitting a stopping point that she could not surpass. She could strengthen her limbs, fly at unearthly speeds, perform healing spells, harden her scales so that a blade of diamond could not cut through. Yet she could not reach her full potential; it was as if the gods themselves were holding her down.

She found herself upset most of the time, agitated at the slightest of things. When she was not training then she was pacing, growling and kicking anything out of her path. She practiced her strength on trees and stones, pounding them with everything she had until they crumbled to dust beneath her. At least _this _was an improvement. She was growing so strong, in fact, that she had doubled in size from the sheer intensity of her training. All the better, in her mind.

One evening, after hours of attempting to further her magic training, she crushed a stone twice her size to rubble. She roared as she sent the final blow onto it and shattered it like glass.

"My apprentice," Sphere said, "you are hurting yourself."

She swung her head towards him, teeth bared. He was not fazed. "I understand that you have suffered an enormous loss. I, myself, know what it is like to lose everything. Iâ€"

"_No you don't!_" She shrieked, opening her wings and stepping towards him. "You have no idea what this feels like!"

Sphere gave her a saddened frown, tilting his head. "I do. Do you know how I earned my name?"

"Of course I do." He had told her on one of their first nights together. He had made a fake sun in the sky, earning a name: the highest of honors in dragon culture.

Sitting in front of her, Sphere said, "Do you know what happened afterwards?"

She struggled through the rage, her pounding heart filling her ears. "Did youâ€|take on other apprentices?"

Sphere closed his eyes. "No. I was exiled."

Her breath left her in a burst. The anger seeped away, leaving shame and guilt curled up beneath it. "You wereâ€|.what? But why?"

Sphere craned his head north. "Dragons are selfish creatures. What we do not have, we take. What we cannot have, we scorn. My magic is unlike any other kind. I possess the average magic of a dragonâ€"what I have been trying to teach youâ€"but also a magic given to me by the gods."

She took a moment to absorb that. "_Two _kinds? What's the other?"

"Soulfire." He shifted and inhaled deeply. As he did, a stripe from the tip of his nose to his tail lit up with the lime green of his fire. Upon breathing his flame, it flowed as smooth as honey, and he caught it with such ease in his claws that it baffled her. He drifted his paw through the air, leaving behind a molten ribbon of fire, and spun it round and round until it formedâ€|.a sphere.

"Wow," she breathed, enamored by its beauty and elegance as it hung there, a perfect drop of sunlight. After a moment, "Teach me. I beg of you."

Sphere dropped his paw, the glow fading and the fire dispersing into a flurry of sparks. He hesitated, and then pulled her close with his wing, holding her in a somewhat-awkward hug. "You are not yet healed. Soul-magic is named as such because it uses a dragon's very being. It is exhausting, overwhelming, and can easily corrupt its bearer."

The hint, as always, was blaringly obvious, but she snorted and rolled her eyes all the same. "Then tell me this: why show me? Why take me on as your apprentice when I am clearly not fit for it?"

For the first time, she saw pain flash across his face. He studied her, distraught, not even caring to mask his emotions as he always seemed to. "I understand your pain. I know what it is like to lose love, to be so very alone. I may not have had hatchlings, but it still burns nonetheless." Her leaned down and gave her a reassuring

lick to the forehead, smiling wanly when she pulled away in embarrassment. "In time, my apprentice. But I cannot in good conscious give you soulfire when you are so deeply wounded."

* * *

><p>She was getting better at magic.<p>

She practiced more by herself now. The pain she felt had long since faded to anger, a deep need for revenge. It was no comfort knowing that she had killed the _monster_ at her first chance. The other dragons who had been there had also been responsible, in a way. This was fallacious reasoning at best; she knew what she was really angry with, but couldn't break herself to acknowledge it.

She was supposed to protect them. That was her sole purpose when they became a part of her world. Now they were gone, and she had failed.

So she practiced with all her time. She tried to recoverâ€"she really did! But it seemed like a waste of time, like it had become a part of her. She had lost her children. She had become a dragon. Those horrible facts were enough to shake her entire core, leaving her with no solid footing.

All she had left was magic. If she could control what had changed her life so dramatically, then maybe she could find peace. Maybe she would not wake with nightmares that left her sobbing in the desolate and empty darkness. She even thought she had found a new kind of magic, as idiotic as it sounded. When she strained it just right, when she tried to expand it _out_, she could feel something. The first time she had done it around Sphere, he had grown very uneasy, and so she took to practicing it only when he was not around.

So, then, at nightâ€"at night was when she _really_ honed her skills.

She would wait until Sphere would fall asleep. She could no longer sneak around while he was awake; she had grown too big. She was now his size, even though he had dwarfed her when they had first met.

Then she would start her own spellâ€"her magic that operated outside her body. It was intangible yet present, like a shadow. She would reach for Sphere and would suddenly feel his presence, like he was a part of her soul. Sometimes she would even hear and see things, little glimpses of his dreams. She would halt everything if he so much as stirred.

It was exciting, to have such power. She couldn't wait to perfect it and show it to Sphere. Maybe then he would show her soul-magic.

And thenâ€"then, she would finally be at peace.

* * *

><p>She was starting to get worried.<p>

Her magicâ€"mental magic, she'd dubbed itâ€"was becoming more powerful with each passing night. It filled her with pride; it was

hers and hers alone, a shadow that could expand and blanket anything it came into contact with in her influence. Now when she reached out, she could feel exactly where Sphere's source of magic was, in the center of his chest where his fire lied. She could even touch it like it was tangible. And when she dove into his mind, she could clearly see and hear all that he dreamed.

If she tried hard enough she could even see and hear his memories. She viewed this part of her with trepidation; it felt wrong, like she was stealing the only thing the dragon possessed. They had grown to trust each other like family, and the very act of lying to him made her feel uneasy. To shift around through his mind was a brutish and horrible betrayal.

Sphere was growing restless. He spoke of taking on new apprentices, and jealousy shot through her like an arrow with each suggestion. When she told him that such dragons would not appear from thin air, he seemed baffled at the aspect.

She needed to help him, but didn't know how. He was so unlike himself, she was afraid to bring up any sensitive topics for fear of upsetting him. She didn't know what had gotten into him, but it was the present matter; mental magic could wait.

* * *

><p>She was finished with her training.<p>

Sphere brought her the news one day with a proud, loving smile, pressing his warm forehead against hers.

"You have strengthened your magic as much as you can, my apprentice. You have learned all that I can teach you about healing magic and combat magic. I have never been so happy," he said with a smile that reached his eyes. "I am truly happy to have met you, to have grown so close to you, as if you were a part of my brood. You are much like a sibling to me."

"And you as well," she returned with warmth, leaning heavily into him and purring. After a moment she drew away, squashing her anxiety, and asked, "So will you finally train me in soul-magic?"

He did not respond right away, and it was all it took. She flicked her head to the side angrily, glaring off to the side.

"It is because I want to build a new nest."

She blinked, twisting her head to stare at him. "A new nest?"

He nodded. "Yes. To teach you soul-magic will take many seasons yet. I want to bring this gift to all dragons. So we must build a new nest that we can teach together."

"And where will these dragons come from?" She asked. Again.

Sphere smiled, but it was pained. "We must take hatchlings."

It took her a second to process that. Something dark within her stirred. Then she leapt to her feet. "Absolutely not!"

Sphere did not seem surprised by her reaction. "I know that you are particularly inclined to disagree. Please, understand why. I have been exiled by all of the dragons of the north. Any dragon we try to take in now will scorn us. We must take in hatchlings, because they are the only dragons who are unbiased enough to listen."

"I will not participate in the kidnapping of children!" She seethed.
"I will not allow it!"

Sphere leaned in close to her as if afraid something else would hear. "But if we have a nest then you will finally be able to heal your wounds."

"Oh, and how is that?" She snorted. She would be lying if she stated that the same thought hadn't crossed her mind "but this was insane.

"Because you will have children." It was said so bluntly that she did a double-take. She felt the anger come charging forth, and did all she could to force it down.

Sphere closed his eyes and hung his head, wings and shoulders drooping. "It is a horrible, shameful thing to say. But I know the soul of your pain you lost your hatchlings. If you could once again raise young, then perhaps it will help you finally come to terms with your losses." He looked up at her, eyes agonized. He had to crane his neck, since she had grown taller than him. "It pains me deeply to see you filled with such fury, my apprentice. I only wish to help you. I am in no way asking you to replace your own but to try and recover."

Guiltily now, he asked, "Will you join me?"

She stared at him.

He was offering to her family. Her own children again. The joy of raising a child, of having them call her Mother and love her unconditionally. But it was wrong. It was it was

_I can make things right this time, _she thought. _I can I can amend my mistakes. I can make my childrens' deaths not be in vain. I can finally be happy._

She leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his. "I will."

* * *

><p>She was doing the unspeakable.<p>

It was a damnable thing. She knew it. Sphere knew it.

But they had to have a nest.

They waited until mating season had arrived and the nests had flocked to their hatching-grounds. On the night of the first hatchlings' appearances, they would swoop in.

She quivered with excitement and fear. They had had to wait two seasons. Two seasons of planning and looking forward to family. Two seasons until she could have children again.

And tonight was the first night.

The moon was goneâ€"all the better. The dragons were huddled over their young, most of them fast asleep after an exhausting day of meeting their offspring.

She hovered above the island, far enough up so that her wingbeats could not be heard. Because she had increased so heavily in sizeâ€"now a fair amount larger than Sphereâ€"she had to be very far up. She took this as a benefit; she could see each and every nest. She could see every single child that would soon be hers to love and raise.

Oh, she could already tell that they were beautiful.

A whoosh of air, and Sphere was at her side. She nodded with a giddy smile, and he returned it.

"Tonight, we start a family," he purred, butting his head against hers.

"Tonight," she agreed.

Sphere dove until he was on the far side of the island. His dorsal spines began to glow that lime green, and he banked in a tight circle. His fire exploded across the night sky, twirling into an enormous sun that lit up the world as if it were no longer night.

The dragons below all awoke with cries of fear and shock. Sphere continued his soulfire, placing himself just inside the fire so that he would not be easily seen.

_Come on! _She thought, staring at the unmoving dragons below.

One dragon took flight to investigate. Then two. Then three.

Yes! Thank the Dragoness of the Moon!

She flew down as quietly as she could, dropping straight down first and then making her way up to the island. Most of the hatchlings had been abandoned, left to sleep without protection. The soulfire was simply too impossible to ignore.

Running over to a particularly crowded area, she took in the hatchlings. Two-Walkers, Hum-Wings, Flame-Skins, even Two-Wings. There was one lonely Shadow-Blender separated from the bunch, its wings limp and frail. It quite nearly looked dead. Curled up next to the poor thing was a Forest-Cutter, a dragon that would grow to be almost as big as she was.

She nudged them all awake, leaning down and crooning at them. They were babiesâ€"they didn't understand speech or that she wasn't their mother. All that they knew was that she was there, and that she was warm and loving.

She tilted her head and pushed a hatchling up onto it. It clambered onto her back with wobbly, unsure feet. She scooted the rest closer to her, growing more frantic with each one. The babies had clinging

instincts, Sphere had told her. They would hold on to her. They would be safe.

Finally all that was left were the Shadow-Blender and Forest-Cutter. She grabbed them both in her claws and took off into the darkness. She did not look back.

She was two minute's flight away when the daylight suddenly ended. Sphere had dropped his spell and disappeared into the night, ready to meet up with her later. She breathed a sigh of relief. Even though she had her children with her safe and sound, it was still a frightening and dangerous stunt.

Distant howls and shrieks soon rose from behind, brought to her ears by the wind. They gave her some guilt, but it was a price to pay for family. Besides, after everything that she had gone through, did she not deserve to feel the loving embrace of children once more?

* * *

><p>She was a mother again.<p>

The children scampered about her body, clambering through the forest of spines that dotted her body. They were such playful things, ready to go on an adventure at a moment's notice.

That is, all of them but the little Shadow-Blender.

Something was wrong with the poor thingâ€"that much was clear. She was unable to even open her eyes most days, squirming in place and whimpering.

Both Sphere and herself had attempted healing-magic, but nothing seemed to take hold. She grimaced down at the little Shadow-Blender as she curled closer towards her chest. Her thoughts briefly went to her mental magic, but brushed she brushed it off. The shadow of her magic twisted bitterly within her mind, almost as if it were aware of being ignored.

"Sphere," she called. Her mentor lifted his head from the Hum-Wing he was caring for and approached warily, leaning down to observe the frail hatchling.

"This unfortunate Shadow-Blender," he said, sniffing about the child's body.

"Why won't our magic help her?"

Sphere shook his head. "Something inherent. Perhaps the Dragoness of the Moon did not intend for her to live in this time, in this form."

She felt the anger from long ago rise, and batted it down. "We still have to at least try to save her. Look at the other children." They spared a moment to watch their children dart about. One took off into the air and held flight for a few seconds before smacking into the ground with a frustrated grunt. Turning back to Sphere, she said, "They are so full of life. But this oneâ€"|"

The Shadow-Blender baby curled up and shivered, almost as if she

could feel their eyes on her.

* * *

><p>She was realizing that the Shadow-Blender was an omen.<p>

They awoke on the third day to the beautiful Shadow-Blender cold and still, having left them in the night.

She and Sphere were heartbroken, curling up against each other for hours as their children hovered uncertainly. It was little comfort that the Shadow-Blender was doomed from the start.

And thenâ€|it started happening to the other children.

They had been hunting and feeding the children as any other good parent would. Sphere swore to the Dragoness of the Moon that he knew exactly how to take care of the babies, but even the regurgitated food seemed to have little effect on their health. They ate, of course, and they drank from a nearby stream that they were brought to. But it was hopeless.

After four days, the children began to lose their vigor. They had started to learn words with eager enthusiasm, clambering around their mother and father for knowledge. Yet now they hardly spoke at all, only showing the barest hints of intrigue when they were spoken to. Their playfights were a little less wild, their attempts at flight more and more lethargic.

After seven days, the children stopped playing. They would only pace slow patrols throughout the cave that had been chosen specifically to raise them. Any attempt from herself or Sphere to brighten up their mood was met with a blank, tired stare. Those that did not walk sat and stared into nothing, only snapping out of the trancelike state when they were physically taken back from it.

After ten days, the children could not move. They slept restlessly for most of the days, only rousing when they were awakened. What time they did spend awake, they cried and cried until their tiny, helpless voices could say no more.

After thirteen daysâ€|after thirteen daysâ€|

* * *

><p>She was inconsolable.<p>

She wept and wept and wept. She held the forms of the little dragons close to her heart and tried to will them back to life, bathing them in her tears and begging the gods to give them back to her.

Sphere stood at the mouth of the cave, head bowed and wings splayed. His body rattled like an unsteady sapling faced with a hurricane. When he tried to speak, he could produce no sound. Eventually he could not stand to be alone anymore and crawled to her, where they curled around the dead and sobbed.

They mourned for thirteen daysâ€"the time that they had been lucky enough to spend with their children.

* * *

><p>She was ready to show Sphere, if only to distract him.<p>

"Sphere," she called to him. He was absentmindedly clawing a pattern into the soft earth, staring out to sea from the cliff that they had traveled to. After some time, it had been decided to leave the cave that held their awful memories, and to try to find a place to begin anew.

He stopped his drawing, craning his neck to see her. "Yes, my apprentice?"

She had rehearsed the entire conversation that would follow in her mind. She had no doubt that it would turn out as she wanted.

With as much confidence as she could muster, she said, "I've invented a new form of magic."

He blinked at her, sitting up straighter and turning his body to face her. "New magic?"

Nodding, she trotted over and sat in front of him, blocking his view of the ocean. "Yes. It's something that I have been trying to perfect for many seasons. I didn't want to show it to you until I was content with it, so that I wouldn't come to you with an imperfect form." She leaned down so that their eyes were level and said, "I call it mental magic. I believe that the best way to describe it is with a demonstration."

Sphere narrowed his eyes, concerned now, but nodded anyways. With a reassuring grin, she reached inside herself, finding the shadowy mist at the center of her forehead. When she nudged it to life it twisted and writhed, angrily snapping away from her controlâ€"a recent development, but nothing she couldn't handle. Unfazed, she pushed it outwards to her only remaining family, pushing it into his mind.

He squirmed, eyes widening and pupils slitting. She dug in deeper and deeper, until she could see and hear and feel all that he could. For a moment it made her pause. His heart was hammering, his mind racing too fast for her to follow.

He was afraid.

Don't worry, she told him, letting the words echo through his mind.

Sphere snarled. A golden-orange arm flung through the air, and the side of her face erupted with pain from eye to jaw.

With a shriek she yanked her magic back, returning it to its place inside of her. Sphere stared at her with such vehemence that she sunk far below him, pressing her body to the earth and quivering. Never, in all of their time together, had he lifted a single claw against her.

"Thatâ€|that devilry," he growled. Squeezing his eyes shut, he shook his head, like he was trying to dislodge it. "_Never _use it again. You cannot invade another being like that. You cannot do it so

casually, claiming it as something to perfect. Do you understand what horrors such an evil can do?!"

She stared at his feet, shaking. "N-no," she stuttered.

"Then clearly you have not thought about the implications of your own actions! You cannot use power recklessly simply because you can!"

"Iâ€|Iâ€|" This was all wrong! He was supposed to be impressed, not angry! "â€|I just wanted to show you that I was ready for soul-magic."

Sphere turned away with disgust. "You have shown me nothing but your own ineptitude." He got up and turned his back to her, wings extended. "I will leave you to think about what you have done."

He left her then, soaring into the clouds above. She held her head and clenched her eyes shut, cursing herself for such stupidity. How could she have been so blind?

Mental magic was a mistake. She would never use it again.

* * *

><p>She was fully prepared this time.<p>

The half-moon gave a weak light onto the isle below, casting its blue-green waters in a ghostly light. It was a huge, craggy place, with plenty of places to hide in the darkness. The few shrubs that vegetated it were all but dead from the heat of the hot springs that pockmarked the isle, and the air above it was shrouded in mist.

She hovered inside the fog, allowing it to mask her form and sending great bouts of it drifting on either sides of her wings. Sphere was nowhere in sightâ€"a good sign. She took in a deep breath to steady herself, forcing her shaking limbs to become as still and cold as steel.

They had vowed not to fail this time. The children _would _survive.

Still, doubt ate away at her. Even in the year they had waited, her girth had only grown larger. All it would take would be one parent that looked down to the islandâ€"and they would see a shadow-cloaked dragon twice their size gathering up all of the babies.

She had realized that, in that event, she would almost certainly die. As big as she was, she couldn't fight off a good dozen or two dragons that had plenty of magic and fire at their disposal. Which made their mission all the more invaluable; a "next time" might not even be a possibility.

A faint hissing rose from somewhere off to her left. She began to twist her head to face it before stopping herself, allowing only one of her eyes to watch in that direction. Lately she had been having trouble focusing on objects directly in front of her. Sphere had told her it was because her eyes were growing further apart as she developed larger in size, and that eventually she would have to watch as a Two-Walker does to get the clearest view of something.

She had more important things to worry about.

As if to reinforce the thought, the entire sky exploded with light where the hissing had once been. She fluttered in shock momentarily; the ball of soulfire was just so _big! _She could have easily fit inside it if she curled up a little bit.

Thanking the gods for giving Sphere the strength for such an enormous spell, she tucked her wings in and plummeted towards the island. The adults were already rising to meet the ball of fire, some lighting their own fires in their mouths. None of them noticed her as she swept past them, too focused on the confusing and strange oddity that had boomed into existence above their hatchling-grounds.

Taking extra care to land softly, she got to work with renewed vigor. The babies in her direct line of sight woke at the massive vibrations she sent through the ground, lifting their heads and tilting them. She crouched down low and nuzzled the nearest childâ€”a precious little Flame-Skin with magenta scalesâ€”and lifted her massive wingspan over the surrounding nests. Already, children were wobbling towards her on unsteady legs, seeking comfort from the shadows she cast.

In but a few seconds she had at least fifteen children before her. She was disappointed to see no Shadow-Blendersâ€”part of her wanted to make up for the atrocity of the last one with anotherâ€”but she wasn't going to be picky. Each and every single one of them was perfect, beautiful in their own way.

"Hello, my children," she greeted, lowering her head next to the tiny flare. "Your mother wants to take you somewhere wonderful."

The children stared at her, confused. An easy grin split across her face; how silly, to think that they could understand words yet.

"Up, up," she encouraged them in a singsong voice. Sliding her wing underneath their tiny feet, she lifted them up to her back and allowed them to slide onto her spines. Twisting her head, she watched with a gentle grin as they clung to her with their pinprick claws. How adorable that clinging instinct was, really!

She spread her wings and lifted off the ground with a little too much excitement. The water from the hot springs rose up to meet her, drenching her underside. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder to check on the children. They seemed stricken, but otherwise alright.

"Well done, my children," she whispered to them. "Now we'llâ€”"

"Our hatchlings! _Our hatchlings!_"

The screech filled every bone in her body with dread. She didn't think, didn't look backâ€”she opened her magic reserves and flung herself into the night, gritting her teeth as the childrens' grips considerably tightened. Any faster, and she'd throw them off.

Sphere ended his spell as abruptly as it had been brought forth, sending darkness crashing back into the sky. She could hear their rapid wingbeats as they pursued her and smell the thick, musky scent

of their fear.

And then her vision was filled with them.

Three of the dragons all but winked into existence in front of her, forcing her to backpedal and pull into a hover. They were old, by the dullness of their scales and strength of their magic they had used to catch up with her—so old, she was shocked that they could still reproduce. One was a black Two-Walker, one a cream-and-orange Two-Head, and the last an aqua Shrill-Scream.

The Two-Walker bared his teeth. "Release our hatchlings, stranger." Each word was like the breaking of ice, harsh and brittle.

_Where are you, Sphere?! _She begged to her companion. She risked glancing about for him, only for her heart to fill with dread. The adults had completely surrounded her—all of them.

They were going to take her children from her!

"_Stay back!_" She screeched, shooting off a thick, dark orange flame above the elders. To their credit, they did not flinch away from the warning shot, only narrowing their eyes. The children whimpered to her for comfort, and a bolt of adrenaline shot through her. If these foolish adults and elders attacked, they would kill the babies!

"You're completely surrounded," the Shrill-Scream hissed in a voice like a waterfall. "Those hatchlings are not yours. You did not lay their eggs, watch over them, show them their way into the world. Return them to their families."

She shook her head, eyes wildly twisting back and forth. If she were not carrying the children, she could easily fly away. But she couldn't prompt an attack.

"I won't hurt you if you let us pass!" She gasped. "We will not harm you in any way!"

An adult, young from the sound of his voice, let loose a roar of outrage. "She has my son!"

"She has my daughters!"

"_She has my entire brood!_"

No, no, no! All rationale fell apart like sand. They weren't going to let her pass! They would never listen to her!

A thought hit her. A terrible, horrible thought.

Her mind wandered to the ball of shadow at her forehead, her magic that invaded the mind. She remembered Sphere's words and shuddered.

But—the children needed her—needed them! And—!

A flash of green light, a boom—and the elders were gone.

"_FLY!_" Sphere bellowed directly above, his dorsal spines lit with

lime soulfire.

She burst through the hole the elders had taken up, sparing the time to spin and spew magic-enhanced flames in a half-circle. The dragons screamed in agony and shock, a few falling out of the sky with smoldering scales.

She twisted and pedaled her wings as fast as they would go, willing the children to hold on just a little stronger. The ocean became as smooth as ice below, the clouds stretched out to ridiculous lengths. The poor babies whimpered and cried, but there was no choice, no other means of escape. She flew and flew and flew until the sun breached through the ocean.

They had picked a new home for the dragons—one that would surely bring about success. It was, in fact, similar to most hatchling-grounds; a desolate, warm island far in the south. Sphere had hypothesized that the cold, dark cave they had housed the children in previously had somehow hindered their growth.

She circled the island twice to make sure it was uninhabited. Then she fluttered down and landed as gently as her aching muscles would allow, gasping for air and eyes filled with specks of neon darkness.

Lying down, she half-extended her wings onto the soft grass to allow the children down. They slid down on quaking legs before crawling under the safety of her wingspan, occasionally giving soft chirps and squeals.

"Shh, my children," she said, lifting her wings to look at them. "Do not be frightened. You are perfectly safe now. I promise."

* * *

><p>She was never more relieved to see Sphere.<p>

There he was, two days later—and sporting a new scar. His movements were oddly slow and weary, although he snorted and shook his head when she voiced her fears at the horrible sight.

"A little battle won't make this old dragon die out," he said, leaning into her as she embraced him with all she had. At her stern look, he grinned and slipped away. "How are the hatchlings?"

"You can see for yourself," she said somewhat hesitantly, lifting her wings and twisting her body so that he could see behind her. The children were currently playing on the silky grass of the island, too young to realize how vulnerable they were out in the open. She would have much rather they play by the craggy cliffs that rose up and down as abruptly as ocean waves—at least that way, there would be plenty of places to hide in.

"Beautiful," Sphere breathed, settling down beside her and leaning into her, resting his head against her side. Again his joints moved a little too shakily, his voice a little too hoarse. "They are strong. The last ones—," he closed his eyes momentarily at the awful memory, "—the last ones were weaker. I distinctly remember how ill the Shadow-Blender was—maybe she spread it to them."

"Perhaps," she said. He seemed cold, so she wrapped a wing around him and purred. He returned it much more quietly, still stubbornly trying to show that he was fine.

They sat for a long time, watching their children frolic through the small meadows. Their little darlings were as happy as they could be—and well-fed, too. She had made _extra _sure of that.

Yet—why did her heart ache with anxiety?

* * *

><p>She was losing them again.<p>

"Eat, please!" She begged the magenta Flame-Skin, nudging the regurgitated fish towards him.

"Eat," her child grumbled—one of the few words he knew. He turned away and fluttered his wings, doing his utmost to lift from the ground. When he fell not even a few meters into the air she snapped her head out to catch him.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, she looked towards the rest of the island. Sphere was downhill, in one of the meadows that their home had to offer. He had curled his long, sleek body around the babies and extended his wing out over them. Currently he was sleeping almost as a swan does, twisting his neck around to rest on the small of his back between his wings.

This Flame-Skin had been the first to become ill. It had pained her and Sphere to do so, but they had been forced to separate him from the rest of the nest; they knew that if he were allowed to stay with the rest, his brothers and sisters would suffer his fate as quick as dry grass catching aflame.

No, she thought. _Never again._ Lowering her head, she gently slid the Flame-Skin off of her nose and onto the grass next to the fish.

"Go on, my child," she said. "Have some of this. It will make you feel so much better."

The Flame-Skin sniffed at the fish and wrinkled his nose, twisting his serpentine body away and slumping into the grass. He looked like a bag of leathery, bony flesh—not the proud dragon he should be. Every rib jutted from his frail torso, his limbs merely twigs. From his wheezing, thin breaths, even a blind dragon would be able to tell that he had not eaten for days.

He wasn't listening. Just like the last children, he refused to follow their advice—and it was _killing him._

Throwing her head up, she set her eyes on the heavens. Nothing but the twilight sky met her searching, desperate eyes.

"Please, give me the power to help him," she prayed. Letting her head hang close to the ground, she choked, "Oh, please—please let me save him."

The Flame-Skin nudged her leg, and she made sure to plaster a

reassuring smile on her face before she lifted her head to meet his eyes. Her poor child stared up with eyes cloaked in a film of white. With a soft whine he turned and limped deeper into the shadows cast by the near-set sun. When he turned to look back at her, she saw nothing but the faint moonlight reflecting off his eyes, the dying sunlight outlining the jutting ribs and hips where his skin had stretched taught over.

Her mouth parted slightly. A small, despaired gasp managed to rip its way from her throat. She turned back up to the sky and whispered, "Is it truly what you want?"

The stars were just barely visible. The grass whistled in the breeze. The ocean was as calm as it had been for days.

She turned to her child and drew close, settling down next to him and resting a wing over him. Closing her eyes, she looked to the ball of shadows at the center of her forehead. For a moment she hesitated.

The shadow writhed against her touch, but it was a futile effort to take her over. Leaning down to place a small kiss on her child, she allowed the shadow to rush into his mind. For a moment the shock of it wrestled to knock her over; the sudden fear, confusion, and pain.

—

Don't worry, my love, she whispered. The Flame-Skin looked up at her with glossy eyes.

As tenderly as she could, she nipped at her child's scruff and lifted him off the ground, lumbering over to where his dinner had been set out for him. She shuddered as she felt the sensations that he felt, saw the world sway through his eyes. Everything was a huge blur to him, unfocused and strange. It struck her how ill her precious baby really was, how easy it was to miss the signs.

She set him down next to the fish. _Eat_, she asked of him. _Please._

"Eat," her Flame-Skin said. He pawed the meal towards him and paused, staring down at it. Then, like a toddler, he began to pick away at it, forcing down little bits of fish down his throat. It sickened him. He hated everything about it. Yet he did as he was told, and did not stop until his belly was about to burst.

Smiling, she jerked the shadow back, ignoring the furious way it tried to wrench free of her hold. Leaning down to nuzzle her well-fed child, she whispered, "Well done, my child."

* * *

><p>She was completely blindsided.<p>

The gods had given her confirmation of what she had to do. They had given her permission to defy Sphere. And when she had, her child had done as she'd said—he'd helped himself to grow stronger.

So why—|so why—|?!

The children looked like living skeletons, huddled together for what

meager warmth they could provide each other.

Sphere came running at her pained outcry, only to stumble over himself when his eyes caught the horrid sight. He stood, ears pinned and mouth gaping, and crouched low. "I'm finding a healing-dragon," he said in a calm, toneless voice. In a flurry of wingbeats he had disappeared, utilizing his magic to become nothing but an orange blur in the sky.

She waited until he was gone. When she was certain he had not turned around, she forced the shadow out and sent it flying into the minds of the hatchlings.

Pain.

There was so much of it. Never had she used her magic on this many dragons before; she'd never had the chance. Her head pulsed with the effort, and she clenched her eyes shut as the memories and thoughts and emotions of fifteen dragons swamped her entire being. It was all she could do not to be overwhelmed, to lose sight of herself in their suffering.

Children, she called to them. Tell me what ails you so. Let your mother help you!

The children heard her—she felt them register her voice, understand what she wanted. The purple Flame-Skin made a blatant effort to ignore her, deciding to try to sleep instead. A few of his brothers and sisters were too caught up in their own pain to even try to respond, hoping that someone else would instead.

A tiny Forest-Cutter attempted to squeak a response, but found no strength other than to call out, I can't.

Her heart shattered. Her teeth grit with enough force to tire her jaw, and her body trembled with rage.

I'm going to help you, my children, she promised them. The hope that rose in their innocent hearts nearly ripped her resolve in two, but she continued, I'm going to make sure that you will be healthy.

Spreading a shielding wing over them, she held them close and pushed all her strength into them. She dug deep into their essence and searched for something—anything—that was the evil behind their failing health. She poured magic into them the traditional way to offer their bodies the power to continue living on.

And with her mind she made sure they were at peace. She spoke kind, gentle words to them. She let memories of happy times in her life pass from her to them. She showed them memories of what they used to be, to give them the resolve to survive.

It took hours, but soon her magic dwindled. First went her physical magic—always the weaker of the two. She was able to keep her mental magic present all the way until the sun broke the sky the next day.

The effort of reeling her mental magic in was staggering. It swirled against her hold, hissing and biting. It wanted revenge, it wanted to

inflict on others the sorrows it bore. With a mighty pull she thrust it back inside herself, panting at the effort it took.

She couldn't help itâ€"she fell asleep.

And when she woke, the children were cold.

She leaped to her feet and launched her shadow into themâ€"only for it to curl around their minds as if they were shielded.

"No!" She screamed. She nudged every last one, desperate for the slightest movement, the barest hint of warmth. "No, no, _NO!_"

The children did not respond.

Nothing did.

* * *

><p>She was furious.<p>

Even from the distance, she could see Sphere's silhouette against the sky. He was alone.

He reached the island before a growl could even escape her, mouth and claws filled to the brim with healing leaves. Without sparing her a glance he galloped to their children, gnawing on some of the leaves and whispering to the children that he had a special treatment for them. So earnest and frantic were his actions, he seemed not to notice that he was attempting to heal corpses.

"Sphere." Her voice was ice. The shadow within her screamed and howled.

His head twitched towards her, but he continued with his work. Separating foliage, mashing some together, enchanting some with magic and thrusting fire onto them so that they would become golden-orange embers. It was healing-magic in its most complex and potent form, especially with the particular plants he had found. Watching him busy himself, a thought struck her:

If he had been earlier, they would have survived.

This time the word came out as a curse. "_Sphere_", she snarled. He stopped, paused, tilted his head. His long, slender wings fell to the ground. Lifting a shaking paw, he nudged the nearest child to him with his claws.

The plants in his mouth fluttered to the ground. He sunk to the earth and wrapped his serpentine body around the children, clenching his eyes shut. "May the Dragoness of the Moon guide you," he breathed.

"Where were you?!" She exploded. Sphere snapped his head up, eyes wide. "You were gone for so longâ€"there was nothing that I could, nothing!"

Sphere looked down at the children and hung his head. "The healing plants required for such powerful spells are exotic this far south. Iâ€"

"That doesn't explain why it happened _again!_" She screeched. She squared her feet and spread her wings to their fullest extent, casting him in shadows. "You say you know how to take care of them, but it is very clear that the opposite is true! They need more than food and water, they need _something _that you don't know!"

Sphere watched her with a tight, pained frown. "I have long since been in this world to know how to care for young," he said, his voice thin and wavering. "I was a hatchling myself, and I have lived in the company of dragons lucky enough to have their own." He leaned down and nuzzled the children. "Oh, little onesâ€¦please forgive me."

He stood up as fast as his elderly legs would allow and walked towards her. She shrunk away, bearing her teeth. Despite being small enough to fit his head in her mouth, his approach still sent adrenaline prickling down her spine.

Sphere stopped but a winglength away from her. His eyes dug into her, hard and calculating. She found herself looking away guiltily, for reasons she couldn't comprehend.

"You are so full of anger, my student."

She narrowed her eyes. "Of course I am. The children are dead for reasons we cannot comprehendâ€¦for reasons that should not be so."

Sphere's jaw set. "Yesâ€¦" He let his voice trail off and watched her, expectant. She shifted in place, held his gaze, and said nothing.

"Very well," he said. Turning away, he mumbled, "Let us tend to the hatchlings."

She looked away. Shame filled her in a torrential downpour, flooding her from within. It had happened again. The children were dead. She knew nothing of caring for dragon hatchlings, but she had still triedâ€¦she had still thrown her soul into it!

Her eyes widened. She lifted her head.

"Sphere?"

He stopped grooming the children and lifted his head. His eyes almost seemed hopeful.

She swallowed. "Iâ€¦I have a suggestion."

* * *

><p>She was going to make sure they would be successful this time.<p>

They hadn't waited a year like last time. The second group of children had succumbed to their terrible illnesses within such little time that some nests had yet to leave their hatching grounds.

She limped through the rocky terrain of their island, casting furtive glances to the sky every couple of seconds. It was such a desolate,

dry place. With a shudder she held her precious bundle closer to her chest, careful not to hold too tightly.

A loud outcry came from the bundle, filling the barren, volcanic island with sobs. She sat down to cradle it against her chest better, shushing and cooing.

"Ooh, oohâ€¦no, sweet child, don't you worry," she sang. She settled down and lay the bundle on her arm, where it fit with plenty of room. Without a second thought, she unlocked the angry shadow within her. It was extremely difficult to make contact with himâ€"but still she persisted, and after several minute's worth of trying, she managed to find a way in. Her thoughts swarmed around those that were not hers, calming and soothing, until the crying stopped.

She jerked the mental magic back just as the sound of wingbeats came from above. She didn't move; she'd lived with him long enough to know how he flew.

"I have them," Sphere panted, smiling uneasily. On his back, several sleepy and bewildered hatchlings clung to the short spikes that ran down his spine.

And in his claws, he held the other half of what she was holding. He set it down against her side, allowing her to tip her head to see it.

"Human hatchlings," Sphere murmured. She could tell by his tone that he still did not completely agree with it. She had been persistent, though. "How has it come to this?"

She nuzzled the baby anyways. A perfect baby boy, sleeping soundly despite having being carried at high altitude for quite some time. He would have a brother, the one resting on her arm, and they would grow up strong and healthy.

"I know how to care for them," she said, keeping her tone light and soft. "They will live."

"A human cannot fly, nor can they wield magic," Sphere stated for the umpteenth time, settling down beside her and twisting his neck around to grab each hatchling by the scruff and place them underneath his wing.

"They will learn to love dragons, to know of magic, and to protect our nest," she said. "If we are to teach a nest of soul-magic, then we will gather attentionâ€"and not only from dragons."

Sphere gave her an odd look. He grew quiet, grooming the babies in silence while she did the same to her own. They remained silent the rest of the night.

* * *

><p>She didn't know what they were doing wrong.<p>

Again and again they were met with the same and awful sights and smells. Again and again they sought out their family. Again and again they cycled through manic highs and deep depression as their children came in and out of their lives.

No matter the species, no matter the time of year, no matter the location, no matter the supply of healing-leaves, no matter the love they poured into each and every child.

The heartbreak was familiar now, though they were not numb to it. Her shadow was a constant barrage, and Sphere seemed to grow older with each day. She had taken to occasionally practicing her mental magic on him during the night, attempting to heal him as she had tried with the children. If she could just perfect itâ€|if she could just find what had been lost to her, then she could make these horrible tragedies stop.

After all, they had to keep trying. It was the only way they could heal.

* * *

><p>She was feeling hopeful about these ones.<p>

She and Sphere were sitting together, much further south than they had gone ever before. Cradled in her arms were dragon hatchlings and a human child, sleeping soundly. They had survived much longer than the others: a full month. Sphere had obviously been trying to work up the courage to speak to her about something, and she had been amusing herself by guessing when he would actually do it.

Eventually, he spoke. "My apprentice, I have a question that he been with me for many seasons, and I feel it is now appropriate to ask."

She rolled her eyes. How typical, blurting out his rationale before actually doing something. Sphere had always been the more careful of the two. "Go on."

"My studentâ€|" he paused, collecting his thoughts, and she turned her head to get a full view of him. "Do you still wish to be human?"

She gawked at him, but he was no longer looking at her, but at the babies cradled against her. Looking down at them, she realized with no small amount of horror that she had _forgotten._ She had _forgotten _that she had been changed into a dragon, even as she prepared to care for babiesâ€|she had simply known that she knew how to. Yet she had forgotten what she had become, had stopped spending agonizing nights trying to understand who she wasâ€|for countless seasons now.

It was unimaginable to her that she could be human now. To not have her great size and the power that she had awoken inside her beastly body, to never spread her wings and ascend above all who challenged her. To abandon magic, to abandon her mental magic that she alone knew how to do. To abandon her resolve to learn about soulfire so that she could be at peace, and to care for hatchlings so that she could make up for everything that she had done wrong.

"â€|no," she breathed. "No, I wish to remain in my dragon body."

A strange sadness filled Sphere's eyes. "That does not answer my question, my student, whom I love so deeply." When she looked to him

in confusion, he explained, "I asked you if you wished to be _human_. Not if you wished to regain your human form."

"I don't understand," she said, shaking her head. One of the babies coughed, and she leaned down to make sure that he was alright.

"There are differences between humans and dragons other than form," Sphere said. "When we first met, you were very much a human in a dragon's body. It gave me insight on how humans think and feel in the face of loss, and showed me the terror of their wrath. Now we have been together for many full turns of the seasons, and I no longer see this in you." When she reared her head back, he reached a paw out and let it rest on her arm. "To me, you are now only a dragon—one that did not hatch from an egg, and one whose magic is odd and foreign, but a dragon nonetheless. Is this what you wish?"

Her jaw worked up and down, but she didn't know what to say. "I—" she tried, and then looked away. "I am no longer the person I once was, yes. And I admit that—I have not thought of my human life or self in a very long time."

For the first time in well over, she struggled to picture the faces of her children. Her _real_ children. Had they survived, they would be adults now—elderly, with children and perhaps great-grandchildren of their own. Yet all she could imagine now was their slaughtered bodies, their cruel wounds.

She stared at the babies, and Sphere's words when he had discussed his exile returned to her unexpectedly. _Dragons are selfish creatures. What we do not have, we take._

With a choked cry she leapt to her feet, causing the child that had been resting on her arm to fall and burst into tears. Ignoring Sphere's concerned gasp, she bolted away, spread her wings, and took off into the sky. The anger that had always been with her surged, overwhelming, and for a moment she let it overtake her.

"_NO!_" She screamed, filling her jaw with gas and sending thick flames about her. The fizzled through the air like an explosion.

When they dispersed, Sphere was in their place.

"Forgive me," he begged, hovering closer. "This was not my intent. I should not have spoken of such things to you. I am deeply sorry, my apprentice." He leaned close, pressing their foreheads together, but she pulled away.

"I'm a monster!" She howled, spinning in place, frantically looking for an escape, as if she could simply fly away from her burdens. "I'm just the same as the dragon who killed my children!" Sphere tried to interrupt her, but she wouldn't let him. "I _stole_ babies and thought I could make them my own! I've done nothing but sentence them all to death! I've ripped them away from what happiness they could ever have! I'm a _monster!_"

"You are _not_—" Sphere began.

"_Get away from me!_" With that, she spun and opened her magic

reserves, bolting away. She knew Sphere would catch up with her in mere seconds if he ever wanted to.

But he let her go.

End
file.